



Positive Parenting of Toddlers

Wandering

As soon as toddlers are mobile they start to explore their environment and roam around. This is natural for young toddlers. Safety and careful supervision are the main concerns for parents at this stage. However, some older toddlers seem to wander or run off whenever they get the chance. They may stray in the wrong direction or hide or run away from their parents on purpose. This tip sheet gives some suggestions to help you teach your toddler to stay close and not wander.

Wandering can occur on shopping trips, walks, picnics, or just playing in the back yard. You may turn away for just a second and find that your child has gone. This can be worrying because toddlers are often not aware of danger.

Some parents use restraining harnesses to prevent their toddler from wandering. Although helpful, this does not teach children to stay close, it simply prevents them from wandering. The problem often returns when the restraint is not used.

To stop your child wandering, act quickly and decisively. The behaviour to encourage in a wanderer is staying close to you. Make remaining close more rewarding to your child than the excitement of running away or wandering on their own.

How To Teach Your Child To Stay Close

Set Aside Time To Teach Your Child

Plan a series of short trips with your toddler. Don't stop taking your child out because they wander, give them even more opportunities to learn to be a good walker and stay close. Start with a short walk that lasts about five minutes. Your first trips should be in safe places such as parks or quiet streets. The next trips should be slightly longer, building up to about a ten minute walk. Avoid busy places and streets until your child has learnt to stay close.

Prepare Your Child for the Trip

Explain where you are going—*We're going for a walk down to the shop for some bread.*



Explain the Rules

Decide on some simple rules for walking together and explain them to your child. Rules should tell your child what to do rather than what not to do. Here are some examples:

- Stay close to Mummy or Daddy.
- Do as you are asked straight away.

If your child is speaking at this age, ask them to say the rules for going walking. Praise your child for saying the rules. If your child cannot or does not say the rules, calmly tell your child what the rules are.

Encourage Your Child To Stay Close

At first, praise your child frequently for staying close, before they have a chance to wander. As you walk, talk to your child. Point out flowers, birds, trees, or anything of interest along the way.

Remind Your Child of the Rules

If your child starts to wander, immediately tell them what to do—*David, you are too far away. Come back here, please.* If your child returns to your side, praise them for doing what they were asked—*Good boy for coming to Daddy when I asked.*

Deal With Wandering by Holding Your Child's Hand

If your child does not come back or takes off again, move quickly and grab them. Give a firm instruction and follow up with action—*No, you must stay close to Daddy. Now you must hold my hand for the next 20*

steps. For ten steps hold your child's hand firmly, then for the next ten steps relax your hold a little. Remind your child of the rules, let go of their hand and let them walk independently. Do this only once during a trip.

Use Quiet Time To Deal with Problem Behaviour

If your child struggles when you hold hands or starts to run off again, grab them, explain what they have done wrong and the consequence—*You have not stayed close to Daddy, now you must go to quiet time.* Stop walking and put your child in quiet time. Quiet time involves removing your attention from your child and having them be quiet for a short time. You can sit your child on the pavement or have them stand on the grass verge until they have been quiet for 30 seconds. Remind your child that they must be quiet before you can continue walking. If necessary, hold your child by wrapping your arms around them and holding them firmly so they cannot move. If your child struggles or protests in quiet time, as a last resort, pick your child up and return home. Try again next time.

Continue the Trip and Praise Your Child for Staying Close

Once hand holding or quiet time is over, continue walking. Frequently praise your child for staying close.

Review the Trip

At the end of the trip make a fuss with praise and attention if your child remembered to stay close for most of the trip. Tell your partner and grandparents or family friends, who can also praise your child for walking well and staying close. If your child did not follow the rules, remind them what you would like them to do next time and set up another practise trip—*David, let's go to the post-box tomorrow and see if you can remember to stay close to Daddy.*

Let Your Child Practise Staying Close with Others

After your child has learnt to stay close on short trips, let them practise staying close on long trips and with others, such as grandparents.

Gradually Reduce Praise

Once your child is walking well without wandering off, gradually reduce the number of times you praise your child. Praise your child from time to time for staying close.

Key Steps

- Set up short practice trips.
- Remind your child of the rules for walking together.
- Talk to your child while you walk.
- Praise your child for staying close.
- Deal with wandering the first time by holding your child's hand.
- Respond to problem behaviour with quiet time.
- Review the trip with your child.

If Problems Persist

If wandering persists, here is another strategy you can try:

- Explain to your child that they can earn a stamp or sticker if they follow the rules for walking together.
- Tell your child that these stamps or stickers can earn a special reward at the end of the walk.
- Decide on how many stamps or stickers your child must earn to get the reward, and what the reward will be.
- Get everything ready before you go. You will need a small self-inking stamp or a sheet of small stickers such as stars or dots.
- While you are walking, if your child follows the rules put a stamp or sticker on the back of their hand and praise them. To begin with you may do this every 30 seconds.
- Deal with problem behaviour as suggested above.
- At the end of the walk, count the number of stamps or stickers your child has earned. If they have reached the goal, give them the reward.
- Gradually increase the time your child must wait between stamps or stickers, until you can phase out the reward altogether. Praise your child from time to time for staying close.

See the booklet 'Positive Parenting' for more information. If you have any questions or have tried these strategies and are concerned about your child's progress, contact the centre where you were given this tip sheet.

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