

BY ANNE CASSIDY

before our family's recent car trip to Michigan, our 2-year-old, Claire, was completely toilet-taught. By the time we arrived home, 1,600 miles and many missed potties later, it seemed as if she'd never learned. I was determined to avoid diapers, so I spent the next week doing a lot of mopping up and wondering whether we would have to go through the whole toilet-teaching process again. Luckily, just as I was getting close to despair, Claire started staying dry again—to her visible relief as well as mine.

A 2-year-old's life is full of slips back into behaviors that you thought she had outgrown: A once independent toddler suddenly clings to you whenever you leave the room. A child who has gone to sleep on her own for months starts asking you to lie down beside her until she drifts off. Out of the blue, the original "do-it-myselfer" turns helpless and asks you to dress and feed her.

Some parents call it regression. But the more positive—and accurate—way of viewing this syndrome is "two steps forward, one step back." Your child is learning so much so quickly that a few steps back are inevitable. But even if she appears to have lost ground in the short haul, don't worry. It won't be long before she's using the potty or feeding herself once again.

In fact, many experts look at regression as an integral part of development for virtually all toddlers (and adults, too, for that matter). According to Cyn-

thia Garcia Coll, Ph.D., director of the Stone Center for Developmental Services and Studies at Wellesley College, in Massachusetts, "Going back is a way of moving forward. The process of development is such that children don't just stop doing things the old way; it gets reintegrated into new ways of doing things." Dealing with change can be so stressful for toddlers that they feel the need to take a

Anxiety over changes at home can trigger your toddler's crying, clinging, or other old behaviors.

step back and regroup between their great surges of learning and

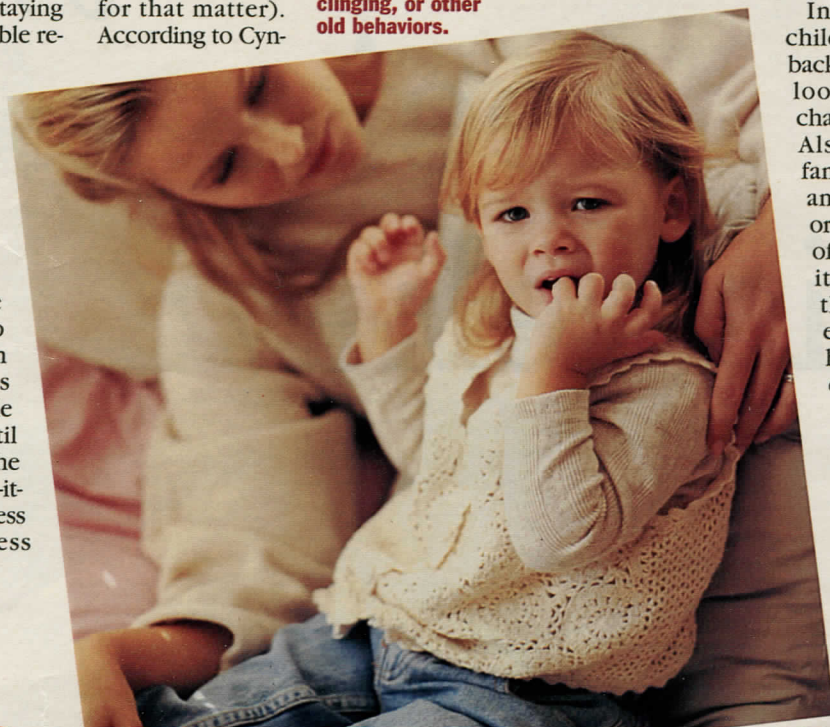
growth. For them, the easiest way to get this emotional breathing room is by temporarily returning to a way of behaving that is familiar to them.

A step back can be triggered by any major change in a toddler's life.

Many circumstances can trigger regression: a family vacation; the birth of a sibling; a new nursery school, play group, or caregiver; a move to a new house; or an illness. It can even be sparked by a growth spurt that increases your child's need for sleep and food.

In general, if your child has taken a step back, it's a good idea to look for any recent change in his routine. Also examine your family life. If, for example, your spouse or you are under a lot of pressure at work, it is quite possible that the tension is extending into your home life. A 2-year-old is certainly sensitive enough to pick up on such feelings and to experience anxiety about them.

Sometimes, uncovering the



ROSS WHITAKER

regres

What it means when your child reverts to outgrown habits.

causes will require you to do some detective work. For instance, even if your child has consistently gone to the same day-care center and been with the same provider, don't assume that you can cross that off your list. Talk with the provider—perhaps an aggressive new classmate is upsetting your child.

Toilet-teaching is often an arena for regression.

Even the most humdrum toddler existence (if there is such a thing) contains sufficient physical and emotional challenges to make backsliding a natural response. An achievement such as learning to use the potty is, to be sure, a real effort for a toddler. Pamela McKenzie, M.D., a developmental pediatrician at Denver Children's Hospital, says, "Before she can be toilet-taught, a child must have good motor skills, good sensory feedback, and good timing—and she must want a little independence, too." You can see how even a slight upset might wreak havoc with such an important and difficult accomplishment.

In addition, when your toddler learns a new skill, an old one can suffer. "The last-learned skills are the first to go, because they're the ones that take the most mental effort," McKenzie says.

Two-year-olds are also beginning to move out into the world—this is often the age of their first group-play experiences—and the new demands being made on them can be a source of stress, according to Claire B. Kopp, Ph.D., a professor of psychology at the University of California, Los Angeles, and author of *Baby Steps: The "Whys" of Your Child's Behavior in the First Two Years* (W. H. Freeman). "As their social world expands, the pressure that toddlers feel to be polite and nice to others is in conflict with their own need for autonomy, so they do slip back into less mature

One-on-one time will convince your toddler that she can get your attention without acting babyish.



Toddlers find that being an independent person is a scary thing.

ways of behaving," she says.

Because the classic struggle for children this age is between their desire for closeness and their need to be on their own, it's not sur-

prising that two of the most common forms that regression takes are trouble going to bed (which requires that your toddler separate from you for the night) and ex-

cessive clinginess. After a child takes her hunger for independence to its limit, she often retreats to old, familiar behaviors—as well as people—for comfort and refueling. She may be starting to discover, in a vague sort of way, that being an independent person is scary. "Children fear losing their parents' love," says Cynthia Coll. "They want to be babies to make sure that they don't."

This is especially likely to happen when there is a newborn in the house. Says McKenzie, "When parents are all excited about a new baby, a 2-year-old says to herself, 'Hey, if you want a baby, I'll give you a baby.'" So she soils her underpants or cries for a bottle.

Your child must learn to work through regressions.

Listen to the message that your toddler's regressive behavior is sending. You may not be in a position to reverse the circumstances that have brought on this regression. After all, you can't return the new baby to the hospital or undo your

Strategies for handling regression

WHEN YOUR TODDLER returns to habits that you thought he had lost for good, here are ways to respond: **Sometimes you can deal with a step backward** by humoring your child. When our daughter, Suzanne, was almost 3, she reacted to her sister Claire's birth by squeezing herself into

an infant-size gown. Whenever she did this, I would smile and say, "Look, Suzanne is pretending to be a baby," emphasizing the word "pretending" in a way that recognized and permitted her infantile behavior. **With older twos, you can often ask direct questions.** If your previously toilet-

taught toddler is having accidents, say something like, "I know it's harder for you to use the potty now. It will be okay again soon. But let's try to figure out why it's hard now. Is it difficult for you to get your pants down? Do you want me to remind you to use the potty?" Such ques-

tions remind your child of her capabilities. **Stress the perks of being older,** such as the special toys and privileges that come with age. Plan special excursions for just the two of you. Help your child realize that in many ways, it's more fun to be a big kid than a little one. —A.C.

vacation. And even if you could, something else would pop up to disrupt your child's life. So how do you make these times as easy as possible for you and your child?

It helps if you begin by acknowledging to your toddler the message that underlies the behavior. "My youngest just started preschool, and now she's climbing in my lap saying, 'I'm your baby,'" says Coll, who is the mother of three. "I say, 'Of course you'll always be my baby. But isn't it amazing that you're such a big girl now? And isn't it fun that you get to go to school?' I let her know that I'm aware of her frustrations and her desires, but at the same time I tell her that I love her just the way she is."

If circumstances cause a step back, do what you can to alter them.

Sometimes you can change the situation that's making your child regress. If he is having trouble adjusting to nursery school, invite his teacher to your home. According to Liz Van Deerlin, a preschool teacher

Two-year-olds get stuck in regressive behavior only if parents make it an issue.

at Chevy Chase Baptist Church Children's Center, in Washington, D.C., a visit from a teacher helps knit together the world of school and the world of home to make the child feel more comfortable.

Sometimes you can make alterations in your own life when they are called for. Claire Kopp tells the story of one mother who dropped a full load of graduate-school

courses so that she could spend more time with her daughter, who had suddenly started biting again at her day-care center.

Within a few weeks, the biting stopped completely.

Although a solution this extreme is rarely necessary, you can make smaller changes—say, leaving the house 15 minutes earlier each morning so that you don't have to rush—that will remove some pressure from your family's daily life.

What you don't want to do is come down hard on your child for taking a step back. Twos are more likely to get stuck in a regression when parents make a big deal about it and turn it into a power struggle. This does not mean, however, that you should condone biting, hitting, or any other harmful behavior. "But for



If your toilet-taught child starts having accidents, gently remind her of her earlier success.

something like a lapse in toilet training, try not to get too upset," says Kopp. "It's going to get better."

Above all, give yourself a break during the one-step-back periods. It isn't always easy to summon up patience, resourcefulness, and a light touch when you are frustrated by your toddler's lost toilet-teaching *and* you've got two loads of laundry to do. If you're finding that dealing with the regression is too stressful, have your spouse take charge for a while, or trade child care with another parent.

And remind yourself that once your child has learned a skill, it almost always returns quickly. That's why it's *two* steps forward and *one* back. □

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When a step back is something more

IF YOU SUSPECT THAT your child's regression may not be just a temporary setback, here's what to do: Make sure you're not reinforcing babyish behavior. Often without realizing it, some parents either think that a toddler's infantile behavior is cute or have trouble accepting that their child is growing up. And children can sense it. According to Liz Van

Deerlin, a preschool teacher in Washington, D.C., when parents send children to the day-care center, a quick, confident good-bye is best: "It's like tearing off a bandage—better to do it fast than slowly." **Look for an actual illness.** A toilet-trained child who suddenly begins wetting her bed may have a urinary-tract infection; poor sleeping habits can signal an

ear infection. If you see other clues that your child might have a medical problem, call your pediatrician. **Consider getting professional help.** If the one-step-back period lasts more than a couple of months or includes a severe bout of aggression, irritability, or inattention, men-

tion the problem to your pediatrician, advises Claire B. Kopp, Ph.D., professor of psychology at the University of California, Los Angeles. Should it seem necessary, she adds, seek the opinion of a child-development specialist recommended by the pediatrician. —A.C.