



## Understanding Why Toddlers May Not Seem to Listen Understanding What Is Really Happening Beneath the Behaviour

### A Note for Parents

If you have ever found yourself saying:

- “Why won’t they listen?”
- “I’ve asked them five times already.”
- “Are they ignoring me on purpose?”
- “They listen to everyone else but not me.”

You are not alone.

One of the most common concerns parents raise during therapy is that their toddler “doesn’t listen.”

While this can feel frustrating, exhausting, and sometimes even embarrassing, it is important to understand that in many cases, what looks like “not listening” is actually a reflection of typical child development rather than intentional defiance.

At The Nurturing Hand, we encourage families to look beneath the behaviour and become curious about what a child’s nervous system, brain, and developmental stage may be communicating.

### Is My Toddler Ignoring Me?

The short answer is:

Probably not.

What often appears as ignoring is usually a combination of:

- Developing attention skills
- Immature impulse control
- Strong curiosity
- Emotional overwhelm
- Sensory processing differences
- A brain that is still learning how to shift attention

Toddlers are not designed to follow directions perfectly.



They are designed to:

- Explore
- Experiment
- Investigate
- Learn through experience
- Push boundaries
- Discover how the world works

This is exactly what healthy development looks like.

### **What's Happening in the Brain?**

A toddler's brain is still under construction.

Many of the skills adults expect children to demonstrate are controlled by areas of the brain that are still developing.

This includes the ability to:

- Focus attention
- Resist impulses
- Stop an activity and switch to another
- Follow multi-step instructions
- Think about consequences
- Regulate emotions
- Prioritise someone else's request over their own interests

These abilities are largely managed by the prefrontal cortex.

The prefrontal cortex continues developing well into adulthood and is far from mature during the toddler years.

This means toddlers often do not yet have the neurological capacity for consistent self-control, flexible thinking, and immediate compliance.

They are not giving you a hard time.

They are having a hard time.

Curiosity Is Stronger Than Compliance

Toddlers are naturally driven by curiosity.

Their brains are constantly searching for:

- Novel experiences
- Movement
- Patterns
- Sensory information



- Exploration opportunities
- Things that feel exciting and rewarding

Imagine calling your child's name while they are:

- Watching water swirl down a drain
- Building a tower
- Watching a spinning fan
- Examining an insect
- Playing with their favourite toy

In these moments, their brain may be deeply immersed in exploration.

Their lack of response is often not a conscious decision to ignore you. Their attention is simply fully invested elsewhere.

### **What Grabs Their Attention?**

Toddlers' brains are naturally drawn toward things that feel:

- New
- Interesting
- Predictable
- Exciting
- Sensory-rich
- Emotionally rewarding

For some children, particularly neurodivergent children, this pull can be even stronger.

Their attention may become focused on:

- Favourite toys
- Specific interests or themes
- Certain sounds
- Particular textures
- Visual patterns
- Repetitive movements
- Predictable routines

This is not necessarily problematic.

It is often simply how their brain organises and understands the world.

### **When “Not Listening” Can Mean Something Else**

When a child does not respond, there are often underlying reasons beyond behaviour.

#### ***1. They Are Dysregulated***

A dysregulated nervous system struggles to process information.



When children feel overwhelmed, anxious, tired, frustrated, hungry, sick, or emotionally overloaded, listening becomes significantly harder. Their brain is focused on survival rather than learning.

## ***2. They Are Deeply Focused***

Sometimes children are genuinely concentrating. What looks like ignoring may actually be intense engagement. Shifting attention is a developmental skill that takes years to mature.

## ***3. They Are Overstimulated***

Busy environments can overwhelm a child's nervous system.

Too much:

- Noise
- Movement
- Visual input
- Social demands

can reduce a child's ability to process verbal instructions.

## ***4. They Do Not Yet Have the Impulse Control***

A toddler may hear the instruction.

They may even understand it.

However, understanding and acting are two very different skills.

Many toddlers simply cannot yet stop what they are doing and immediately change course.

## ***5. They Need Connection First***

Children are more likely to cooperate when they feel connected.

When children feel disconnected, misunderstood, overwhelmed, or emotionally distant, cooperation often decreases.

Connection is often the pathway to cooperation.

Why Repeating Yourself Usually Doesn't Work

Many parents find themselves saying:

"Come here."  
"Come here."  
"Come here."  
"COME HERE!"



Unfortunately, increasing volume does not necessarily increase processing.

When children are overwhelmed or highly engaged, louder instructions may actually increase stress and reduce their ability to respond.

Instead, consider:

- Moving closer
- Getting down to their level
- Making eye contact
- Using a calm voice
- Gently touching their shoulder (if they are comfortable with touch)

Connection often works better than repetition.

### **What Can I Do Instead?**

Connect Before You Direct

Rather than calling across the room:

Try:

*"Hey Jack, I can see you're building a huge tower."*

Pause.

Then:

*"In one minute we're going to pack away and have lunch."*

Children are more likely to respond when they first feel seen and understood.

### **Join Their Attention Before Redirecting**

Enter their world before asking them to enter yours.

For example:

*"Wow, look at that water spinning around and around."*

Pause.

Then:

*"Let's watch it one more time and then wash our hands."*



### **Give Processing Time**

Many children need longer than adults expect.

After giving an instruction:

Pause.

Wait.

Resist repeating immediately.

Allow time for their brain to process what was said.

### **Use Visual Supports**

Many toddlers process visual information more effectively than verbal information.

Helpful strategies include:

- Visual schedules
- Picture cues
- Timers
- First-Then boards

Example:

First pack away. Then playground.

### **Focus on Co-Regulation**

Children borrow regulation from calm adults.

When we remain calm, regulated, and connected, we help support the development of our child's own regulation systems.

This does not mean being permissive.

It means becoming the safe, steady presence their nervous system can rely upon.

### **Connection Over Correction**

Children learn best through relationships.

Research consistently shows that connection supports:

- Emotional regulation
- Learning
- Cooperation
- Attachment security
- Resilience
- Social development



When children feel safe, connected, and understood, they are more likely to engage, cooperate, and learn.

This does not mean there should be no boundaries.

It means boundaries are most effective when delivered through connection rather than fear.

### **Key Takeaways**

- ✓ Most toddlers are not intentionally ignoring you.
- ✓ Their brains are still developing the skills needed for attention, self-control, and flexible thinking.
- ✓ Curiosity often outweighs compliance during early childhood.
- ✓ “Not listening” is often a sign of developmental immaturity rather than defiance.
- ✓ Dysregulation, sensory needs, overwhelm, and deep engagement can all affect responsiveness.
- ✓ Connection and co-regulation are often more effective than correction and repeated commands.
- ✓ Every interaction is an opportunity to build emotional safety, trust, and lifelong regulation skills.

### **Final Thoughts**

At The Nurturing Hand, we believe behaviour is communication.

When a child struggles to listen, we encourage families to ask:

“What might my child need right now?”

rather than

“How do I make them comply?”

Children thrive when they feel safe, understood, and connected.

And often, beneath the behaviour, there is simply a developing brain doing exactly what it was designed to do: learn, explore, and grow.