

Toddler Negotiation Cheat Sheet

Business negotiation moves, mapped straight to toddlers

You already know how to negotiate. You've done it in rooms with real stakes: vendors, salary, a contract clause nobody wanted to budge on. A toddler refusing to put shoes on is the same game with lower stakes and worse tantrums. The moves that work in a boardroom work at the front door, because negotiation is negotiation, whether the other party is a VP or a three-year-old who has discovered the power of "no." This cheat sheet maps five moves you already own onto the fights you're having tonight.

What you need: nothing to prep. This is a reference to keep on your phone for the next standoff.

The steps

1. **Offer choices, not open questions.** (business move: limiting the field) "Do you want to negotiate?" invites a flat no. "Red shoes or blue shoes?" gives them control inside boundaries you already set.
2. **Anchor before they do.** (business move: setting the frame first) Say your ask before the tantrum starts. "We're leaving in five minutes, shoes on by then" beats reacting to a meltdown already in progress.
3. **Trade, don't cave.** (business move: concessions have a price) "You can pick the show tonight if shoes go on now" isn't bribery, it's a trade. Caving with no exchange teaches that tantrums are the price of admission.
4. **Use silence.** (business move: let the pause do the work) After you state the ask, stop talking. Filling the silence yourself hands back the leverage you just built.
5. **Know your walk-away.** (business move: BATNA) Decide in advance what happens if they truly won't move: you carry them, you leave five minutes late, you lose the toy for the car ride. Deciding calmly beats deciding furious.

Your cheat sheet

- ☐ Offered two choices, not an open question
- ☐ Stated the ask before the meltdown started
- ☐ Traded something instead of just caving
- ☐ Went quiet after stating the ask
- ☐ Knew my walk-away before I needed it

When it goes sideways

They negotiate every single choice you offer. That's not failure, that's a toddler with strong negotiation instincts. Narrow the choices further and hold the line on the boundary itself, just not the specifics inside it.

You offer a trade and they still refuse. Some days the trade isn't enough. Fall back to your walk-away, calmly, without a lecture. The lecture is for you, not them; they won't remember it in ten minutes.

You feel ridiculous negotiating with a three-year-old like a client. You're not wrong, it is a little ridiculous. It's also working, and that's the only metric that matters at 7:45 AM with one shoe on.

Toddler negotiation is just delegation practice. You already know how to do this.