

STEPS & STAGES



the daddy phase

Toddlers may start to favour their fathers, but it's temporary. Don't take it personally, Mom.

AFTER ANNA GRIFFIN STARTED WALKING AT NINE months, her Daddy obsession became clear: She'd make a beeline for her father whenever he was around. Soon she only wanted her dad to bring her food to the table, cried if he wasn't the one to strap her into her car seat, and insisted that only he put her to bed. The final straw for Anna's mom, Angela-Jo Griffin, came when Anna started calling her father "Mama" and referred to Griffin as "Dada," a phase that continued through Anna's toddler years.

"Every time she called me Dada it was like a little punch in the stomach," says Griffin, who lives in Quispamsis, NB. "She wasn't being cute, she was saying, 'Mama is the one I want to be around and Dada is the other person, and you're Dada.' It was a huge feeling of rejection. I felt like she did not want to have me as her mother."

Although they would try to correct her, Anna insisted on calling her father "Mama." This led Griffin to believe that for Anna, "Mama" meant "comfort" rather than "female."

It's not unusual for toddlers to reject their mothers in favour of their fathers at some point, according to registered psychologist Vanessa Lapointe, who works with kids and families in South Surrey, BC. Very young toddlers cannot differentiate themselves from their primary caregiver (who is usually Mom, at first) until they're around age two, Lapointe explains, which is when their sense of self begins to develop. "As soon as they realize they're a separate person, there's this whole world of other people to explore," says Lapointe. She adds that this is when Dad becomes fascinating, because the child has been "part of mom" for so long and is so used to her presence. Dad is suddenly novel and interesting.

Karine Mahler, a mom of two in Thorold, Ont., experienced this when her toddler son Bentley, now three, began shunning her. Mahler, who worked afternoons and weekends, would come home in the evening excited to see Bentley, and he would ignore her, or he'd cry and run to his dad, who handled the daycare pickup and dinnertime. Even though she cared for Bentley every morning, the transition back to his mother around bedtime was difficult.



"It was horrible. I felt uneasy, and sometimes I'd think maybe he didn't even like me," says Mahler.

Lapointe explains that "relationship polarization" is common during the toddler and preschool years. "The frontal cortex is not yet fully developed, and they can only really glom onto one relationship at a time." If a child has been with her mom all day, once Dad comes home, she's unable to focus on both parents simultaneously. "The child turns her gaze fully on one parent. Some kids will just land on the father," says Lapointe.

If you're a mom with a toddler going through a daddy phase, don't let your hurt feelings affect your interactions. Acting deflated or pulling away can make the situation worse, as your child settles into the relationship with her father or senses the bond with her mom is damaged in some way. Lapointe calls this "defensive detachment."

Instead, allow your child to be infatuated with her father while showing that you're in control, too. Don't give in to every demand that your partner take over. Make sure your child sees you both interacting in a positive way. Showing a united front will prevent an "us against her" dynamic from developing, and dads can help by telling fun stories about Mom.

Both Mahler and Griffin have seen changes: Bentley goes to his mom for extra cuddles, and Anna has decided her mom is more fun for crafts and dance parties. She's using "Daddy" to refer to her father and has devised a new name for her mom—"Cookie." Griffin says she's relieved: "I'd rather be called 'Cookie' than 'Dada.'" —STACEY STEIN

EXPERT TIP

Jennifer Kolari, a Toronto child and family therapist and the author of *Connected Parenting*, recommends that a parent who feels rejected or distanced from his or her child try non-verbal play like cuddling or tickle games. "That increases oxytocin—the love drug—which will naturally stimulate attachment," she says. Find a game or joke that becomes your special thing.