

Temper Tantrums

Temper tantrums can be frustrating for any parent. But instead of looking at them as disasters, treat tantrums as opportunities for education.

Why Do Kids Have Tantrums?

Temper tantrums range from whining and crying to screaming, kicking, hitting, and breath-holding spells. They're equally common in boys and girls and usually happen between the ages of 1 to 3.

Some kids may have tantrums often, and others have them rarely. Tantrums are a normal part of child development. They're how young children show that they're upset or frustrated.

Tantrums may happen when kids are tired, hungry, or uncomfortable. They can have a meltdown because they can't have something they want (like a toy or candy) or can't get someone to do what they want (like getting a parent to pay attention to them immediately or getting a sibling to give up the tablet). Learning to deal with frustration is a skill that children gain over time.

Tantrums are common during the second year of life, when language skills are developing. Because toddlers can't always say what they want or need, and because words describing feelings are more complicated and develop later, a frustrating experience may cause a tantrum. As language skills improve, tantrums tend to decrease.

Toddlers want independence and control over their environment — more than they can actually handle. This can lead to power struggles as a child thinks "I can do it myself" or "I want it, give it to me." When kids discover that they can't do it and can't have everything they want, they may have a tantrum.

How Can We Avoid Tantrums?

Try to prevent tantrums from happening in the first place, whenever possible. Here are some ideas that may help:

- **Give plenty of positive attention.** Get in the habit of catching your child being good. Reward your little one with praise and attention for positive behavior. Be specific about praising behaviors you want to see happen more often (such as, "I like the way you said please and waited for your milk" or "Thank you for sharing the blocks with your sister.")
- **Try to give toddlers some control over little things.** Offer minor choices such as "Do you want orange juice or apple juice?" or "Do you want to brush your teeth before or after taking a bath?" This way, you aren't asking "Do you want to brush your teeth now?" — which of course will be answered "no." Allow control when it doesn't really matter. Instead of struggling over an outfit your child puts on that doesn't match, for example, consider whether this may be an opportunity to allow self-expression and independence and if it really makes a difference given the day's schedule.
- **Keep off-limits objects out of sight and out of reach.** This makes struggles less likely. Obviously, this isn't always possible, especially outside of the home where the environment can't be controlled.

- **Distract your child.** Try offering something else in place of what they can't have. Start a new activity to replace the frustrating or forbidden one (for example, if your child is jumping on the couch, ask them to come help you “cook” by offering a plastic container and wooden spoon. Then you can praise them for helping or following directions, rather than having them start a tantrum or refuse to get down). Or simply change the environment. Take your toddler outside or inside or move to a different room.
- **Help kids learn new skills and succeed.** Help kids learn to do things. Praise them to help them feel proud of what they can do. Also, start with something simple before moving on to more challenging tasks.
- **Consider the request carefully when your child wants something.** Is it outrageous? Maybe it isn't. Choose your battles. It's even OK to change your mind if you originally said no — but find a way to allow the desired treat as a reward for good behavior.
- **Know your child's limits.** If you know your toddler is tired, it's not the best time to go grocery shopping or try to squeeze in one more errand. Hungry kids are more likely to demand food in the store than children who have just had a meal (just like adults!).

What Should I Do During a Tantrum?

Keep your cool when responding to a tantrum. Don't complicate the problem with your own frustration or anger. Remind yourself that your job is helping your child learn to calm down. So you need to be calm too.

Tantrums should be handled differently depending on why your child is upset. Sometimes, you may need to provide comfort. If your child is tired or hungry, it's time for a nap or a snack. Other times, it's best to ignore an outburst or distract your child with a new activity.

If a tantrum is happening to get attention from parents, one of the best ways to reduce this behavior is to ignore it. If a tantrum happens after your child is refused something, stay calm and don't give a lot of explanations for why your child can't have what they want. Move on to another activity with your child.

If a tantrum happens after your child is told to do something they don't want to do, it's best to ignore the tantrum. But be sure that you follow through on having your child complete the task after they're calm.

Kids who are in danger of hurting themselves or others during a tantrum should be taken to a quiet, safe place to calm down. This also applies to tantrums in public places.

If a safety issue is involved and a toddler repeats the forbidden behavior after being told to stop, use a time-out by sitting the child on a designated chair or in the corner for just a few minutes. Be nearby so that you can supervise, but do not interact until they are calm. Be consistent. Don't give in on safety issues.

Preschoolers and older kids are more likely to use tantrums to get their way if they've learned that this behavior works. For school-age kids, it's appropriate to send them to their rooms to cool off while paying little attention to the behavior.

Let your child know that you will tell them when the time-out is over and that the sooner they are calm and quiet, the sooner it will end. This is empowering — kids can affect the outcome by their own actions, and thus gain a sense of control that was lost during the tantrum.

Do **not** reward your child's tantrum by giving in. This will only prove to your little one that the tantrum was effective.

Consider making a “chill out” or “calm down” spot in your home (some teachers use this in preschool, as well). Use a soft cushion and provide books, a stuffed animal, some soft music, and other calming activities in a place where others won’t disturb the child. Encourage your child to go to the spot when angry or upset — not as a punishment, but as a choice and an opportunity to learn to calm down and control frustration.

What Should I Do After a Tantrum?

Praise your child for regaining control — for example, “I like how you calmed down.”

Kids may be especially vulnerable after a tantrum when they know they’ve been less than adorable. Now (when your child is calm) is the time for a hug and reassurance that your child is loved, no matter what. If your child is old enough to discuss the problem, help them come up with some other ways they might have expressed their frustration.

Make sure your child gets enough sleep. With too little sleep, kids can become hyper, disagreeable, and have extremes in behavior. Getting enough sleep can greatly reduce tantrums. Find out how much sleep is needed at your child’s age. Most kids’ sleep needs fall within a set range of hours based on their age, but each child is unique.

When Should I Call the Doctor?

Talk to your doctor if:

- You often feel angry or out of control when you respond to tantrums.
- You keep giving in to try to avoid your child acting out.
- The tantrums cause a lot of bad feelings between you and your child or you and your partner.
- The tantrums happen more often, are more intense, or last longer.
- Your child often self-harms or hurts others.
- Your child seems very disagreeable, argues a lot, and hardly ever cooperates.

Your doctor also can check for any health problems that may add to the tantrums, although this is not common. Sometimes, hearing or vision problems, a chronic illness, language delays, or a learning disability can make kids more likely to have tantrums.

Remember, tantrums usually aren’t cause for concern and generally stop on their own. As kids mature, they gain self-control. They learn to cooperate, communicate, and cope with frustration. Less frustration and more control will mean fewer tantrums — and happier parents.

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