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Taming and Tolerating Temper Tantrums

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A *tantrum* is an uncontrolled outburst or expression of anger and frustration by a young child caught up in the challenges of the moment.

You're in the checkout line with your toddler in a busy grocery store. He sees some candy that you don't intend to buy. Soon you're in the eye of a hurricane-force temper tantrum. Everyone's looking at you, waiting for you to "do something with your child," and your face is burning with embarrassment. Could you have prevented the tantrum? What's your best response? Why do these meltdowns happen in the first place?

Why do tantrums happen?



Perhaps your child is having trouble understanding why he can't have something you gave him once before, can't figure something out, or is unable to complete a specific task. Maybe your child can't find the words to express his thoughts or feelings. Whatever the challenge, frustration with a particular situation might trigger explosive anger — resulting in a temper tantrum.

As adults, our threshold for frustration is much lower when we are thirsty, hungry, or tired. The same is true even more so for a child. When a child is thirsty, hungry, or tired, tantrums are more likely to occur. Too often we see parents dealing with their child's tantrum in the middle of a shopping trip by loudly scolding him. The child is out late and past his bedtime or meal time; yet, the parents expect the child to "behave" by yelling at him to be quiet and sit still. It will not work. It's not fair to a child for his parents to have behavioral expectations the child can't fulfill, and then punish him for not complying.

Do young children have tantrums on purpose?



Many parents would say yes! Sometimes it seems as if your child plans to misbehave (especially in public) simply to get his way. But young children don't plan to frustrate or embarrass their parents. For most, tantrums are simply a way of expressing overwhelming emotions. Planning

tantrums is a little too cognitively advanced for very young children.

For older children, tantrums are usually a learned behavior. When parents reward tantrums by giving in to what the child is demanding or allow the child to get out of a situation or expectation by throwing a tantrum — the tantrums will likely continue.



How should I respond to a tantrum?

The way that parents should respond to a tantrum depends on the age of the child and the function of the tantrum. Younger toddlers and preschoolers may not be able to self-regulate their emotions or express their needs effectively which may lead to a meltdown that cannot be controlled by the child. Older children may learn that tantrum-type behavior is a means to a desired end, especially if their caregivers tend to give in to the tantrum or often fail to set and hold predictable boundaries. These types of tantrums are different, because the child is still in control of his or her behavior. If the parents were to give in, the child could immediately stop the tantrum.



1. Stay calm. It is important for adults to understand their own frustration and anger triggers, as well. If your child's tantrum is making you increasingly angry, you need to know when to walk away and how to calm yourself down, first.



2. Remove the child to a quiet and safe environment. This is especially important for children who are physically reactive and who may harm themselves or others or for children with sensory sensitivities who tend to tantrum when they become overstimulated by their environment or demands.

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3. Assess the type of tantrum:

is it a legitimate meltdown where the child has lost all control, or is the child trying to get something he or she wants (i.e., if you gave in, would the tantrum immediately stop)? If a young child is in the middle of a legitimate meltdown from being overstimulated, tired, hungry, or extremely upset, the caregiver should respond with gentle support in order to promote co-regulation. Co-regulation is the process of providing calm and reassuring care so that the child learns how to eventually model their own behavior after the parent's reactions. Children may respond well to a hug or other close physical proximity to the trusted caregiver. They may eventually be able to calm down enough to use practiced coping strategies, such as deep breathing. If the child is trying to get what he or she wants, the parent should stay nearby and remain calm while making it clear that the boundary is still being held.



4. Debrief. Avoid trying to talk to or reason extensively with a child who is in the middle of a tantrum. Once the child calms down, that is the time to sit down together and discuss what caused the child to feel so upset. You can say, "I'm sorry that you got so upset. Now that you are calm, we can talk about what just happened." Help the child label emotions such as anger and frustration. Practice ways to communicate needs and how to cope with overwhelming feelings (take deep breaths, ask for a hug or quiet time, etc.). This is also a good time to reinforce boundaries, such as saying, "You know that when the timer goes off, screen time is over. Let's find something else to play together, instead."



5. Focus on connection. Some people believe that children are often triggered to tantrum when they are feeling disconnected from their caregivers. Sometimes—if you see a child's behaviors starting to escalate—the best option is to just take 10-15 minutes to really focus on the child with child-directed, non-distracted play. If you are in the middle of an important task, make it clear to the child when they will be able to get your undivided attention. You can say, "I am in the middle of cooking dinner, and it seems like you need my attention. As soon as I get done with this, we can go play together." You can also distract or involve the child by letting him "help" with dinner preparation or by redirecting his attention to another activity until you are available.



Is there a way to prevent tantrums?

Of course not! There is no foolproof way to prevent tantrums, but there are many things parents can do to divert them, even with the youngest children – and giving in isn't one of them! Consider the following:



• **Be consistent.** Establish and stick to daily routines (including nap time and bedtime) so your child knows exactly what to expect and when. Before a child is born, parents should be on the same page about how they will discipline and rear their child and support each other in their enforcements.



• **Set reasonable limits and follow them consistently.** Plan errands ahead of time and go when your child isn't likely to be hungry or tired. If you're expecting to have to wait in line, pack a small toy or snack to occupy your child's hands and attention.



• **Encourage your child to use words.** Young children understand many more words than they're able to express. If your child isn't speaking yet or speaking clearly, teach him simple sign language for words such as "I want," "more," "drink," "hurt," and "tired." The easier it is for your child to communicate with you, the less likely you are to witness a tantrum. As your child gets older, help him or her put feelings into words. Give your child a sense of control by letting him make choices. "Would you like to wear your red shirt or your blue shirt... eat strawberries or bananas...read a book together, or build a tower with your blocks?"

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- **Praise good behavior.** Give a hug, extra attention, and always tell your child how proud you are when he or she shares toys, follows directions, etc. If you sense frustration brewing, suggest a new activity, change location, or use other distractions to change your child's focus. Avoid situations that are likely to trigger tantrums. If your child begs for toys or treats when you shop, try avoiding the aisles with eye-level goodies. If your toddler acts out in restaurants, choose restaurants that offer quick service, cater to children, or have a loud, busy atmosphere where no one is really paying any attention to your child anyway. You may need to delay fine-dining experiences until your child is "over" this phase or learns how to manage his behavior.



- **Stay calm and in control.** When you're in control, your child feels secure. If you lose your cool or give in to your child's demands, you're teaching your child that tantrums are very effective in getting his way – every time.



When do children "get over" having tantrums?



As your child's self-regulation improves, tantrums should become less frequent. Most children outgrow tantrums by age five, but if your young child's tantrums seem especially severe, your older child is having frequent tantrums, or the tantrums have pushed you beyond your ability to cope, share your concerns with your child's doctor. The doctor will then consider any physical or psychological issues that could be contributing factors to the tantrums. Depending on individual circumstances, the doctor might refer your child to a school or community program or, in some cases, a mental health provider. Early intervention can curb future behavioral problems and help your child succeed both at home and at school.

Resources:

"Temper Tantrums." Kids' Health – Nemours Children's Hospital. Last modified June 2022. <https://www.kidshealth.org/en/parents/tantrums.html>

"Temper tantrums in toddlers: How to keep the peace." Infant and Toddler Health – Mayo Clinic. Accessed January 12, 2023. <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/infant-and-toddler-health/in-depth/tantrum/art-20047845>

"Ask Dr. Sears: Intolerable Toddler Tantrums." Parenting.com. Accessed January 12, 2023. <https://www.parenting.com/toddler/ask-dr-sears-intolerable-toddler-tantrums/>

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