

TEMPER TANTRUMS – THEY DRIVE PARENTS CRAZY!!

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You're witnessing your toddler's second temper tantrum of the day. It shows no signs of stopping, and the supersonic, ear-shattering, teeth-jarring screams pierce the air. Your first instinct is to run away and join the circus, but of course this isn't a real option. There must be a better way.

Temper tantrums range from whining and crying to screaming, kicking, hitting, and breath holding. They're equally common in boys and girls and usually occur from age 1 to age 3. Some children may experience regular tantrums, whereas for other children, tantrums may be few and far between. Children's temperaments vary dramatically - some kids are more prone to tantrums than others.

During the kicking-and-screaming chaos of the moment, tantrums can be downright frustrating. But instead of looking at them as catastrophes, treat tantrums as opportunities for education.

Why Do Kids Have Tantrums?

Even the most good-natured toddler has an occasional temper tantrum. They're a normal part of development and don't have to be seen as something negative. Unlike adults, children don't have the same inhibitions or control.

Imagine how it feels when you're determined to program your DVD player and aren't able to do it, no matter how hard you try, because you can't understand how. It's pretty frustrating - do you swear, throw the manual, walk away, and slam the door on your way out? That's the adult version of a tantrum. Toddlers are also trying to master the world and when they aren't able to accomplish a task, they often use one of the only tools at their disposal for venting frustration - a tantrum.

There are several basic causes of tantrums that are familiar to parents everywhere: The child is seeking attention or is tired, hungry, or uncomfortable. In addition, tantrums are often the result of children's frustration with the world - they can't get something (for example, an object or a parent) to do what they want. Frustration is an unavoidable part of kids' lives as they learn how people, objects, and their own bodies work.

Tantrums are common during the second year of life, a time when children are acquiring language. Toddlers generally understand more than they can express. Imagine not being able to communicate your needs to someone - a frustrating experience that may precipitate a tantrum. As language skills improve, tantrums tend to decrease.

Another task toddlers are faced with is an increasing need for autonomy. A child wants a sense of independence and control over the environment - more than the toddler may be capable of handling. This creates the perfect condition for power struggles as the child thinks "I can do it myself" or "I want it, give it to me." When a toddler discovers that he or she can't do it and can't have everything he or she wants, the stage is set for a tantrum.

Avoiding Tantrums Altogether

The best way to deal with temper tantrums is to avoid them in the first place, whenever possible. Here are some strategies that may help:

- Make sure your child isn't acting up simply because he or she isn't getting enough attention. To a child, negative attention (a parent's response to a tantrum) is better than no attention at all. Try to establish a habit of catching your child being good ("time in"), which means rewarding your little one with attention for positive behavior.
- Try to give your child some control over little things. This may fulfill the need for independence and can ward off tantrums. 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 in the position of saying, "Do you want to brush your teeth now?" which inevitably will be answered "no."
- Keep off-limits objects out of sight and out of reach, which will make struggles less likely to develop over them. Obviously, this isn't always possible, especially outside of the home where the environment can't be controlled.
- Distract your child. Take advantage of your little one's short attention span by offering a replacement for the coveted object or beginning a new activity to replace the frustrating or forbidden one. Or simply change the environment. Take your child outside or inside or move to a different room.

- Set the stage for success when your child is playing or trying to master a new task. Offer age-appropriate toys and games. 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; accommodate when you can.
- Know your child's limits. If you know your child is tired, it's not the best time to go grocery shopping or try to squeeze in one more errand.

If a safety issue is involved, and the toddler repeats the forbidden behavior after being told to stop, use a time-out or hold him or her firmly for several minutes. Be consistent. The child must understand that you are inflexible on safety issues.

Tantrum Tactics

The most important thing to keep in mind when you're faced with a child in the throes of a tantrum, no matter what the cause, is simple and crucial: Keep cool. Don't complicate the problem with your own frustration. Kids can sense when parents are becoming frustrated. This can just make your child's frustration worse, and you may have a more exaggerated tantrum on your hands. Instead, take deep breaths and try to think clearly.

Your child relies on you to be the example. Hitting and spanking don't help; physical tactics send the message that using force and physical punishment is OK. Instead, have enough self-control for both of you.

First, try to understand what's going on. Tantrums should be handled differently depending on the cause. Try to understand where your child is coming from. For example, if your little one has just had a great disappointment, you may need to provide comfort.

It's a different situation when the tantrum stems from a child's being refused something. Toddlers have fairly rudimentary reasoning skills, so you aren't likely to get far with explanations. Ignoring the outburst is one way to handle it - if the tantrum poses no threat to your child or others. Continue your activities, paying no attention to your child but remaining within sight. Don't leave your little one alone, though, otherwise he or she may feel abandoned on top of all of the other uncontrollable emotions.

If your child is in danger of hurting himself or herself or others during a tantrum, take your child to a quiet, safe, place to calm down. This also applies to tantrums in public places.

Older kids are more likely to use tantrums to get their way if they've learned that this behavior works. Once kids are school age, it's appropriate to send them to their rooms to cool off. Rather than setting a specific time limit, you can tell your child that he or she must stay in the room until your child has regained control. The former option is empowering; your child can affect the outcome by his or her own actions, thereby gaining a sense of control that was lost during the tantrum.

After the Storm

Occasionally a child will have a hard time stopping a tantrum. In these cases, it might help to say to your child, "I'll help you settle down now."

But do **not** reward your child after a tantrum by giving in. This will only prove to your little one that the tantrum was effective. Instead, verbally praise your child for regaining control.

Also, children may be especially vulnerable after a tantrum when they know they've been less than adorable. Now is the time for a hug and reassurance that your child is loved, no matter what.

Your child's doctor can also check for any physical problems that may be contributing to the tantrums, although this is less common. These include hearing or vision problems, a chronic illness, language delays, or a learning disability.

Remember, tantrums usually aren't cause for concern and generally diminish on their own. As children mature developmentally and their grasp of themselves and the world increases, their frustration levels decrease. Less frustration and more control mean fewer tantrums - and happier parents.