



How to Manage and Prevent Temper Tantrums

Your toddler's second temper tantrum of the day shows no signs of stopping, and supersonic, ear-shattering, teeth-jarring screams pierce the air. You'd run away and join the circus if only that were a real option. There must be a better way.

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 Kids Have Tantrums

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 between the ages of 1 to 3.

Kids' temperaments vary dramatically — so some kids may experience regular tantrums, whereas others have them rarely. They're a normal part of development and don't have to be seen as something negative. Unlike adults, kids 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 their world and when they aren't able to accomplish a task, they turn to one of the only tools at their disposal for venting frustration — a tantrum.

Several basic causes of tantrums are familiar to parents everywhere: The child is seeking attention or is tired, hungry, or uncomfortable. In addition, tantrums are often the result of kids' 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 their 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. Toddlers want a sense of independence and control over the environment — more than they may be capable of handling. This creates the perfect condition for 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, the stage is set for a tantrum.

Avoiding Tantrums

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.** Although this is hard to imagine, to a child, negative attention (a parent's response to a tantrum) is better than no attention at all. Many studies show that any attention, including negative attention, results in an increase in that behavior! Try to establish a habit of catching your child being good ("time in"), which means rewarding your little one with attention for positive behavior. Even just commenting on what they're doing whenever toddlers aren't having a tantrum can help increase those positive behaviors.
- **Try to give toddlers some control over little things.** This may fulfill the need for independence and 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 asking "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 to 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 toddler outside or inside or move to a different room.
- **Set the stage for success when kids are 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 toddler 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 a toddler repeats the forbidden behavior after being told to stop, use a time-out or hold the child firmly for several minutes. Be consistent. Kids 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 their frustration worse, and you may have an escalated 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 and can actually result in an increase of negative behaviors over the long run. 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 follows a child being refused something. Toddlers have fairly simple 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.

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.

Preschoolers and older kids are more likely to use tantrums to get their way if they've learned that this behavior works. Once kids have started school, it's appropriate to send them to their rooms to cool off.

Rather than setting a specific time limit, tell your child to stay in the room until he or she regains control. 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. However, if the time-out is for negative behavior (such as hitting) in addition to a tantrum, set a time limit.

After the Storm

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

Also, 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.

Make sure your child is getting enough sleep. Sleep is very important to kids' well-being and can dramatically reduce tantrums. The link between lack of sleep and a child's behavior isn't always obvious. When adults are tired, they can be grumpy or have low energy, but kids can become hyper, disagreeable, and have extremes in behavior.

Most kids' sleep requirements fall within a predictable range of hours based on their age, but each child is a unique individual with distinct sleep needs.

When to Call the Doctor

You should consult your doctor if:

- You have questions about what you're doing or what your child is doing.
- You're uncomfortable with your responses or you feel out of control.
- You keep giving in.
- The tantrums arouse a lot of bad feelings.
- The tantrums increase in frequency, intensity, or duration.
- Your child frequently hurts himself or herself or others.
- Your child is destructive.
- Your child displays mood disorders such as negativity, low self-esteem, or extreme dependence.

Your doctor also can check for any physical problems that may be contributing to the tantrums, although this is not 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 stop on their own. As kids 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.

Reviewed by: Jennifer Shroff Pendley, PhD

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