

# Coping with Temper Tantrums

## Overview

Ways to understand and deal with your child's temper tantrums.

- Why do toddlers have tantrums?
- How to deal with a tantrum
- If your child becomes upset in public
- If a tantrum is unusually serious
- Reducing the number of tantrums
- Having realistic expectations

Almost all children have tantrums occasionally. Children may have emotional flare-ups when they are as young as 1 year old and continue to have them until about age 4 or 5. Tantrums are most common among 2- and 3-year-olds.

## Why do toddlers have tantrums?

Tantrums can have many causes. Sometimes, they occur because a young child is tired or hungry, or is feeling ill or irritable. Tantrums may also occur because a toddler is frustrated. Very young children have few internal controls and don't have a sense of perspective ("This won't matter tomorrow"). They don't understand other people's feelings or point of view ("I want a story, but Mom and Dad are busy"). And they don't have the language skills to communicate their feelings ("I like playing with my blocks and don't want to put them away!"). When a young child doesn't get what he wants, he may respond the only way he knows how -- by having a tantrum.

During a tantrum, your toddler may express his emotions by screaming, crying, kicking, punching, biting, pulling hair, head-banging, or throwing or breaking things. All of these are normal ways of acting during a tantrum.

## How to deal with a tantrum

Aside from the tension and embarrassment they can cause, tantrums may make you worry about your child's health or safety. You may be afraid that your toddler will hurt herself or someone else. She may turn blue from holding her breath. She may cry so hard she can't catch her breath. Or she may hit the floor or a wall so hard that she might hurt herself. What can you do?

Here are some constructive ways to deal with most tantrums:

- *First, take a deep breath.* Remind yourself that most children have tantrums, and eventually outgrow them. By dealing with an emotional outburst in a calm and thoughtful way, you can help your child find other ways to express her emotions. You will also be setting a positive example for your child on how to handle anger, frustration, and other negative emotions.
- *Recognize the warning signs that precede a tantrum.* Certain circumstances may trigger a tantrum. You may be able to re-direct him with a neutral activity by intervening early before your child gets into a full-blown tantrum.

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- *Divert her.* Offer to read a story. Bring out a favorite toy. Make a funny face. Take her for a walk or to the playground. Your child's attention span is short, and if you can distract her, chances are she'll forget what she was so angry about.
- *Let your child know you understand her frustration.* Give her help if she can't get a toy to work. Give her a hug if she's been having a difficult moment.
- *Ignore the tantrums that aren't too serious.* Leave the room, but stay close by. You might say, "I have to fix dinner." Keep busy, and don't sit down. But be sure there's nothing dangerous around before you leave your toddler alone and be sure to monitor his reactions.
- *Use the "how we feel" technique if your child is not in the midst of a tantrum.* Talk to your toddler about how she feels -- "Gee, you're really angry." Tell her how you feel -- "It makes me unhappy to see you acting like this." This helps emphasize the importance of using words, instead of tantrums, to express feelings.
- *Explain what you want your child to do instead of having a tantrum.* Your child may be having a tantrum because she doesn't know another way to get what she wants. If she's stamping her feet or banging a toy on the floor, you might ask her to "use words" or to tell you why she's unhappy.
- *Move your child to a quiet space where she can settle down.* If you're at home, you might put her in her own room. Two or three minutes alone might be all she needs to settle down if she's overstimulated. When she calms down, use this as a teachable moment with a quick comment like, "You did a good job getting yourself together."

### **If your child becomes upset in public**

Temper tantrums in public places are especially hard to handle. Some of the approaches you use at home -- such as ignoring the tantrum -- won't work at the playground or other people's houses. There may be more danger that your child will break something, or you may not want to cause a scene in public.

There aren't any easy solutions to the problem of tantrums in public. You can try to divert your toddler, but if that fails, the only other option is to remove him. That can mean that you have to cut short your shopping trip or visit. You might try taking your child to the car or a bathroom or outdoors, where you can deal with the problem privately, and return when he's calmed down. It may also help to remember that, embarrassing as a public tantrum can be, other parents may be more sympathetic than you think, because their children have probably done the same thing on occasion.

### **If a tantrum is unusually serious**

Most tantrums are relatively mild, and last only a short time. They may involve whining or yelling, stamping a foot, or kicking the floor. Other tantrums are

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more serious, even violent. Your child may be hitting or kicking others, throwing objects that could hurt someone, screaming or crying continually, or disrupting the activities of others (for instance, making it hard for other children to enjoy a birthday party). You may want to take these additional steps if the tantrum is unusually serious or upsetting:

- *Remove your child from the group and take her to a place where you can help her calm down.* Stay with her.
- *Stay calm and speak calmly.* Remember that the tantrum is as frightening to your child as it is to you.
- *Hold your child if you are concerned that she may hurt someone.* No matter how much she protests, don't let your child go if she is hurting herself or someone else.
- *Remove fragile or dangerous objects from your child's reach.*
- *Don't offer a reward or give in to the original demand.* Promising a reward encourages your child to have more tantrums. And giving in tells your child that tantrums will get her what she wants.

#### **Reducing the number of tantrums**

Sometimes you can reduce the number of tantrums just by taking a firm stand when they occur -- for instance, by making clear that your child can't get a new toy by having a tantrum at the toy store. If other approaches don't work, these tips may help:

- *Try to identify the causes of tantrums.* Does your toddler seem to have tantrums at certain times or in particular places? Try to figure out what might be causing the outbursts. If he has tantrums in the late afternoon, perhaps he's hungry and ready for a healthy snack.
- *Provide a routine and daily schedule for your toddler.* By having regular times for things like meals, baths, and bedtime stories, you will offer predictability and a structure to your toddler's day.
- *Limit the number of choices you give your toddler.* Toddlers often have tantrums when they feel overwhelmed. You may be able to avoid flare-ups by giving your toddler just a couple of choices like, "Do you want to wear your red shirt or your blue shirt today?"
- *Allow enough time for everyday activities.* Avoid rushing from one activity to the next. Young children need time to make the transition from one activity to another. Be sure you give your toddler enough time to get ready for child care or pick out a book for a bedtime story.

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- *Make sure you have toys, games, books, and snacks to keep your toddler occupied and satisfied.* Having favorite diversions handy at home, when in public places, and in the car helps cut down on tantrums.
- *Make an extra effort to stay calm.* Your child may pick up on your feelings of anger or frustration. Try not to become upset even if your toddler is being overly stubborn.
- *Say “no” firmly.* Changing your mind or apologizing for saying “no” may confuse a young child. Try to mean what you say the first time.
- *Plan ahead.* Try to avoid shopping or visits when your child is tired or hungry. You may want to plan these activities for a time of day when your toddler is rested and ready to cooperate.
- *Remember you can’t prevent all tantrums.* Some tantrums are unavoidable, because not all issues are negotiable. You can’t compromise on matters of health or safety, but you can decide to pick your battles. Stick to your rules about these health and safety matters even if your toddler wails every time you buckle him into a car seat or make him wear shoes outdoors.

#### **Having realistic expectations**

Tantrums are such a common part of childhood that no matter how well you handle them, they probably won’t go away as quickly as you’d like. Be patient. By keeping your expectations realistic and setting limits on disruptive behavior, you are sending your child the message that she needs to learn to express her emotions in words.

As her language skills develop and she learns that she does have other ways to let you know how she feels, your toddler’s tantrums will subside. In the meantime, you’ll find more information about tantrums on the site for the American Academy of Pediatrics ([www.aap.org](http://www.aap.org)) and in the temper-tantrums section of the U.S. government’s free online medical encyclopedia, MedlinePlus, at [www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/001922.htm](http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/ency/article/001922.htm).

Remember that the program that provided this publication has additional resources on parenting.

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