

Tantrums



Your parenting experience is cruising along with relative ease and along comes your first big challenge: tantrums! All children experience tantrums at one time or another, some more than others according to their temperament, and to the number of frustrations that have occurred that day. All parents are faced with how to effectively handle tantrums, in private and in public. The goal is to balance two things:

1. Allowing your child to have big emotions without shaming her for having them
2. Managing and containing the situation so that it does not escalate to an unsafe level

Tantrums start at about 12 months of age when children naturally enter an independent stage. They begin to have their own ideas, which are usually in conflict with your own. Tantrums are a sign that your child is developing just fine, and they actually have a beneficial purpose.

The outpouring of strong emotion through a tantrum is a very healthy and powerful way to release pent up emotions due to frustrations. Tantrums are the active process of release and are how children recover from the overload of frustrations.

It is normal for tantrums to be as short as a few minutes and as long as an hour. They can include:

- crying
- screaming, yelling, sweating
- stamping feet, banging head, hitting
- rolling on floor
- holding breath

Tantrums usually occur when children:

- are told "No"
- don't get their way
- can't perform a physically difficult task
- can't communicate what they want
- are overly tired or hungry

If consistently handled well, tantrums will decrease in number throughout the preschool years.

Strategies for Fewer Tantrums

Tantrums will happen; it's a fact of life with toddlers. However, you have actions available to you that will decrease the frequency throughout these early years. Try these ideas:

- 1. Know your child's level of tolerance for stimulation and plan ahead accordingly.** Too many errands, too much noise and excitement, too many pretty, breakable things to touch, and too many demands will all stack up. Toddlers' tolerance level for these things are far below an adults' level.
- 2. Keep consistent routines and eating/sleeping schedules.** Throughout the day, let them know what is happening next so they know what to expect.
- 3. Allow the feelings but don't give in.** Adopt the attitude of: "I know you don't like my answer; you're upset and that's okay. It happens to all of us. I'm here and I love you." A parent's job is to hold to consistent rules no matter the disappointment it causes. Giving in to unreasonable demands, fixing the situation for the child, and rescuing them from frustrations will only teach that tantrums are a way to get what they want and that frustrations are to be avoided instead of worked through.
- 4. Do not try to put a stop to the tantrum with threats.** "Stop your crying right now or I'll put you on a time out!" This will only make it bigger and last longer.
- 5. Do not try to rationalize the tantrum away.** "It's no big deal." "You should be happy that you got any dessert." Statements like these often backfire creating more anger and frustration.
- 6. Understand the workings of the brain under the influence of emotions.** All humans engaged in angry emotions are operating from a part of the brain (limbic system) that CANNOT listen to reason, make good choices, or think of a solution. Only when the emotional storm has passed, and not one second sooner, will the rational part of the brain (prefrontal cortex) be accessible. Then and ONLY then, can any rational dialogue begin. Knowing this can aid your ability to withstand a tantrum.
- 7. Make faces, say something silly, put on a clown nose.** Distractions through laughter and playfulness can sometimes head off a potential tantrum if it is a small one brewing.
- 8. Model anger management in front of your child.** Say out loud what emotion you are having and what you will do to feel better. "Ugh!! I'm so mad I got his parking ticket! I wish this didn't happen! I just need to breathe here for a minute... Well, I guess worse things have happened."



Strategies for Helping a Tantruming Child



- 1. Think safety first.** Be close by to make sure your child doesn't hurt himself, others, or break objects. Move objects out of reach.
- 2. Be close, but not too close.** Be attentive, but not too attentive. You do need to supervise the situation, but give space for the full body movement of your child. Be far enough away that you are not being hit, bitten, or kicked. You can also direct your attention to other things while being nearby: look out the window, read, make your grocery list, etc. Show that you care but you are not feeding the tantrum with your full attention.
- 3. Move to a safe place if needed.** The aisle of a store or the top of your stairs are not ideal places to let a tantrum unfold. Carry your child to a more private or safer location such as a soft, carpeted area or your car.
- 4. Adopt a helpful phrase to say when you are in a public place, people are looking at you, and embarrassment begins to creep in.** "Just experiencing a little technical difficulty... we'll be right back." Be a supportive voice as you witness another parent with a tantruming child: "I was in your place just last week. Don't worry, it'll pass."
- 5. Remain calm as best you can.** Be the eye of the storm. Your calm physical presence will help your child who doesn't know how to rein herself in.
 - Take lots of deep breaths. Count or sing to yourself to help stay calm.
 - Convey confidence that this will pass (even if you are not so sure – act as if you are!) Trust that your child will work it through eventually.
- 6. Say very little.** This is NOT the time to lecture! No information will go into a raging child's brain.
 - Make empathic observations, "Looks like you are SO frustrated! I understand how you feel."
 - Set limits with short, firm, even-toned sentences, "No, I can't let you hit me." If you yell out in anger, you will add fuel to the fire.
- 7. Watch for signs that the emotional storm is winding down.** This is when your child may be ready for hugs. He may be feeling uncertain about what just happened and is wondering if he is still loved. He may need water, food or sleep.
- 8. After reconnecting with your child, she will be more likely ready to hear corrections.** Now is the time to speak about what actions (hitting, throwing, etc.) were not okay. Have her clean up things that were thrown, or spilled. Move forward to the next task at hand.

Resources: Positive Discipline A-Z, Nelsen Lott, Glenn. Becoming the Parent You Want to Be, Keyser, Davis. Adapted by Colleen Murphy.



Key Steps

- Monitor the amount of stimulation. Know when your child is approaching overload.
- Keep to consistent eating/sleeping routines.
- Allow the feelings but don't give in to the unreasonable demand.
- Don't rush to fix things. Don't go against your better judgment just to avoid your child experiencing disappointment.
- Model expressing your feelings and how to handle big emotions.
- During a tantrum:
 - Think safety; carry them to a safe place if necessary.
 - Stay close, but not too close. Be attentive, but not too attentive.
 - Be calm. Be the eye of the storm. Know that this will pass.
 - Say very little. Refrain from engaging in a verbal argument.
 - Offer comfort (hugs, food, water) when they are calming down.
 - Remember, first comes connection, then comes correction.
 - With your help, have child clean up anything that might have been affected by the tantrum.

How Our Brains Works Against Us



Thanks to mirror neurons in our brains, we reflect back to others the same emotions they send to us. When they yawn, we yawn. When others cry, laugh, feel depressed, or yell, our brains return that behavior. What do our brains tell us to do when our child is tantruming? We want to tantrum too! Recognize when those mirror neurons are firing and don't give in. Set a calming tone so your child can eventually mirror your calm energy back at you.

Going Deeper

Part of being a human means to have emotions, no matter what your age. Children are often told not to be upset and to "behave yourself," when they are emotional. Children who are punished or made to feel wrong over and over for having strong emotions may grow into adults who bury their emotions in unhealthy ways such as overeating, abusing alcohol and drugs, or simply shutting down emotionally. They may become adults who rage out of control without any anger management tools. A parent's goal is to teach about feelings: name them, allow them, and make healthy choices about what to do about them. Helping children move through disappointments will strengthen their ability to deal well with all the inevitable ups and downs of life.

One way to support the right to feel is to adopt a family rule that all feelings are allowed in this house. Make it clear that not all behaviors are allowed in regards to these feelings. Yelling, hitting, name calling – not okay. Jealousy, anger, sadness – just a part of life.



Positive Discipline Community Resources

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