

Tantrums

A tantrum is a young child's way of expressing a range of feelings including anger, frustration, hurt or being upset. A tantrum may include crying, screaming, punching and kicking. Temper tantrums are a normal part of child development, but some triggers can make tantrums more likely – for example, the child may feel stressed, hungry, tired, frustrated or overstimulated.

It is important for adults to assist a child to come out of a tantrum and regain control of their own feelings until they can do this themselves.

Tantrums are part of child development

Young children are emotional beings and act out their feelings through their behaviour. Young children do not have the cognitive thinking abilities to plan their tantrums or use them to upset parents. Tantrums are simply a physical expression of the child's feelings. In most cases, the tantrum burns out after five or so minutes.

Tantrums tend to occur when young children do not have the language to express how they feel or the ability to handle their feelings without adult assistance. This often occurs between the ages of 18 months and four years, but each child is different. Some children don't throw tantrums at all.

Tantrums tend to become less frequent as the child learns more about themselves and their emotions. Young children need adults to assist them to come out of the tantrum, regain their dignity and remain calm. The older child learns how to reduce their own heightened emotional state without adult assistance.

Signs of tantrums

Tantrums differ from one child to the next, but are usually a physical expression of a feeling. Some signs of tantrums include:

- Crying
- Screaming
- Foot stamping, falling down, flailing, punching or kicking
- Running away or going limp like a rag doll
- Throwing or breaking things
- Breath holding
- Vomiting
- Head banging.

Triggers for tantrums

It is important to remember that tantrums are a normal part of child development. Children who throw tantrums are not 'bad' or especially naughty. They are just expressing their feelings. However, certain factors make temper tantrums more likely – the child may be feeling:

- Stressed
- Hungry
- Tired
- Overstimulated – for example, by loud or noisy environments where there is a lot going on
- Frustrated – especially about not being understood or not having enough language skills to communicate needs
- Physically ill
- Upset – for example, because a parent has reacted angrily or laughed at the child

- Confused – for example, by inconsistent parenting or caregivers reacting differently to the tantrum in different circumstances.

Tips to reduce tantrums

General suggestions include:

- Spend time together doing enjoyable things when your child is calm.
- Make sure your child gets enough rest and sleep.
- Offer regular meals and healthy snacks and drinks.
- Use distraction whenever possible – this is particularly effective for younger children who have short attention spans.
- Find ways to help your child communicate – for example, encourage them to point at things. Two-year-olds speak only about 50 words. Lack of communication skills is thought to be a trigger for tantrums in younger children.
- Talk and read to your child as much as possible – it may help with their speech development and communication skills.
- Allow your child control over safe things – for example, let them choose which fruit to have at snack time or which toy to take to bed. This gives them a feeling of independence and control over one aspect of their world.
- Think about your child's request before you refuse it – for example, is it really that unreasonable for your child to have a small treat after they have grocery shopped with you, without complaining, for over an hour? It may be that your child's request can be accommodated.
- Keep your parenting consistent – for example, don't change what you expect as reasonable behaviour just because you feel tired and it seems easier to give in. It's not easier in the long run.
- Compliment your child when they are behaving well.
- Recognise the second the tantrum is finished or has changed into sobbing and console the child immediately to assist them to regain their dignity.

Habits to avoid

Bad behaviour that gets rewarded tends to continue. Sometimes, parents (accidentally in most cases) reward the child for having a tantrum. Things to avoid include:

- Indulging the child's every whim for fear of provoking their anger
- Giving in to the child's demands in order to stop the tantrum
- Changing your routine to avoid tantrum triggers – for example, letting the child stay up late because bedtime is such a nightmare
- Giving the child attention (such as yelling) during a tantrum, but giving them very little attention when they are behaving themselves, sends the message that throwing a tantrum is the only way to get attention.

Tips for mild tantrums

Some children have mild tantrums that burn out after a few minutes. Suggestions for parents include:

- Appreciate that tantrums are frightening to your child – they want to avoid tantrums as much as you do, but lack the necessary skills to cope.
- Take note of which factors and events trigger tantrums and think up ways to cope. For example, if your child 'loses it' when they are in the car, plan for car travel to be more enjoyable by playing your child's favourite music and stocking the car with special toys.
- Take notice of your child's pre-tantrum behaviour so that you can step in and avoid the tantrum altogether – for example, an afternoon nap or distraction with a favourite storybook may work if tiredness is a trigger.
- Encourage your child to use words to express their wants and needs as they are able to. Praise them for any attempts to use words.
- Reward your child for coping with frustration – for example, using words to communicate wants and needs instead of kicking or screaming.
- Ignore a tantrum as best you can. Stay as calm as you can so your child sees that you are not agitated. They are less likely to repeat a particular behaviour if you don't react. Children need parents who are in control of their own feelings and behaviour!

- If your child is having a tantrum because they don't want to do something – for example, have a bath – wait until they are calm. Then tell them that it's good that they've calmed down, but they still need a bath.
- Give your child plenty of attention when they are behaving well.

Tips for severe tantrums

Some children have the temperament and strength to throw a tantrum for a very long time or often, or even both. This can fray a parent's patience and turn family life upside down. It is also important to understand when the tantrum has become more than the child simply expressing their feelings. Suggestions include:

- Keep calm – you need to model the behaviour that you want in the child.
- Follow the suggestions for dealing with mild tantrums and reassure yourself that it may take time to see any improvements.
- Plan your strategy in advance. Use the same strategy every time a tantrum starts. Discuss your strategy with other caregivers to ensure consistency.
- Allow your child some space and time on their own until they calm down. Perhaps they may need to stay in their room. However, some children become more traumatised when left alone. If this is the case, keep them close by and make sure they are safe. Console them as soon as the tantrum is over. The child may be quite distressed at their own behaviour.
- Control your temper by distracting yourself. Take time out yourself while you allow the child their own space and let their tantrum burn out. Leave the room, play music, read a magazine or do anything else that works for you. Just make sure your child is safe.
- Avoid changing the family routine because of your child's tantrums. Remind yourself that your child will soon be able to manage their feelings in a more appropriate way as they grow older.
- Seek professional help if your attempts don't get results. Your doctor is a good starting point for information and referral.

Tantrums in public

Sometimes your child will throw a tantrum in a public place such as a supermarket. The humiliation of having strangers judge your parenting performance can ruin your strategy, but try not to give in!

Suggestions include:

- Remember that everyone who is a parent will be feeling for you. Reassure yourself that most onlookers understand what you are going through.
- Stick to your tantrum strategy no matter what. Stay calm.
- Don't lose your temper. Screaming at your child or hitting them may provoke outrage from onlookers, which will only make you feel worse and probably make the tantrum last even longer. We are trying to teach our children to deal with their emotional distress – this does not happen if adults cannot control theirs.
- Leave the shop and go home if the tantrum is severe or prolonged. Both of you may need 'time out' at home.
- Don't put yourself down or lose hope if you do give in to your child's tantrum. Just try to stick to your plans next time.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Maternal and child health nurse
- Maternal and Child Health Line 132 229
- Parentline Tel. 132 289
- Child Health and Safety Resource Centre, Royal Children's Hospital Tel. (03) 9345 5085
- Tweddle Child and Family Health Services Tel. (03) 8387 0658

Things to remember

- Tantrums are a normal part of child development.

- A tantrum is a young child's way of expressing feelings such as anger and frustration. This may include crying, screaming, punching and kicking.
- It is important for adults to help children to regain their dignity after the tantrum, through encouragement and support – until they can do this themselves.
- Tantrums taper off as the child learns more effective ways to deal with emotional distress.

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