
Tantrums

Summary

- Showing 'big feelings' (having tantrums) is a normal part of development for young children.
 - The only way a young child can express their needs and wants is through their feelings.
 - It is important for adults to help children to regain their dignity after a big feeling, through encouragement and support, until they can do this themselves.
 - As the cortex (thinking part of the brain) develops, children are able to learn and implement more effective ways to deal with emotional distress.
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Children's brains develop as they grow. The section of the brain that is 'firing' at the age children commonly have a lot of big feelings (tantrums) is the limbic system (the emotional centre of the brain). Young children see their world and react to many everyday situations through this emotional lens.

Until their cortex (the reasoning and thinking part of the brain) is developed, a young child's only way of telling you about what is bothering them is through expressing their feelings – such as frustration about being misunderstood or not being able to make their needs clear, or being upset.

Some triggers that can spark a young child's 'big feelings' include being stressed, hungry, tired, frustrated or overstimulated.

While children are still too young to regulate their own emotions and behaviour, adults can help them deal with big feelings by 'co-regulating' their mood – for example by being calm, soothing, caring, close and rational until the big feeling passes. This helps young children regain their dignity and know they are still loved.

Young children need reassurance, nurturing and understanding from adults, as they do not understand their big feelings and are not able to manage them on their own.

Big feelings (tantrums) and child development

Young children are emotional beings and act out their feelings through their behaviour. They do not have the cognitive thinking abilities to express themselves in a rational way. When the cortex is not developed, young children are unable to calm themselves on their own.

Young children need (calm and rational) adults to support and help them through their big feeling episodes and to regain a sense of calm and dignity. When a young child is being emotional, it is important that the adults are responding calmly and rationally.

Expressions of big feelings tend to occur at the age when young children do not have the ability to handle their feelings without adult help (co-regulation). This often occurs between the ages of 18 months and four years, but each child is different. Some children don't need to express themselves through big feelings at all.

Older children learn how to reduce their own heightened emotional state without adult help, when the cognitive part of their brain is more developed.

Triggers for big feelings (tantrums)

It is important to remember that big feelings are a normal part of child development. However, certain factors make episodes of big feelings more likely.

Triggers that may spark big feelings include being:

- stressed
 - hungry
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- 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 big feelings in different circumstances.

Tips for understanding big feelings (tantrums)

If your child is expressing big feelings, remember that:

- these feelings are frightening to your child – they want to avoid them as much as you do, but lack the necessary skills to cope
- they are not ‘doing this on purpose’
- they need your calming influence to help them through it
- they cannot calm themselves on their own
- when the big feelings have passed, they need to know they are still loved.

Tips for preventing outbursts of big feelings (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.
- 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 big feelings in younger children.
- Talk and read to your child as much as possible to 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.
- Give your child plenty of attention and compliment them when they are behaving well.
- Take note of which factors and events trigger these expressions of feelings 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 behaviour before a big feeling so that you can step in and avoid them altogether in the future – 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 much as they can. 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.

Tips for coping with outbursts of big feelings (tantrums)

If your child is expressing big feelings:

- Keep calm – model the behaviour that you want your child to display.
- Use distraction whenever possible – this is particularly effective for younger children who have short attention spans.
- If you know that it helps, and you are somewhere that it is safe to do so, allow your child some space and time on their own until they calm down. Perhaps they may need to stay in their room.
- 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 big feeling is over.
- Recognise when the big feeling has subsided and console the child immediately to reassure them they are okay, and that you love them.
- Avoid giving in to their demands. If your child is having a big feeling 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.
- Try not to lose your temper. If you feel that you are becoming angry, distract yourself. If it is safe to do so, leave the room, play music, read a magazine or do anything else that works for you.

Big feelings (tantrums) in public

Sometimes, your child will express big feelings 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 for managing expressions of big feelings in public 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.
- Try not to 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 big feeling 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. (You could finish your shopping online.)
- Don't put yourself down or lose hope if you do give in to your child's big feelings. Just try to stick to your plans next time.

Tips for coping with strong expressions of big feelings in young children

Some children have the temperament and strength to express their big feelings often, or to extend their big feelings for a very long time, or both. This can fray a parent's patience and turn family life upside down.

Suggestions include:

- Keep calm – model the behaviour that you want your child to display.
- Plan your strategy in advance. Use the same strategy every time a big feeling starts. Discuss your strategy with other caregivers to ensure consistency.
- If you know that it helps, and you are somewhere that it is safe to do so, allow your child some space and time on their own until they calm down. Perhaps they may need to stay in their room.
- If your child becomes more traumatised when left alone, keep them close by and make sure they are safe. Console them as soon as the big feeling is over. The child may be quite distressed at their own behaviour.
- Control your temper by distracting yourself. Make sure your child is safe, then leave the room, play music, read a magazine or do anything else that works for you.
- Avoid changing the family routine because of your child's big feelings. 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.

Where to get help

- Your **GP (doctor)**

- Maternal and child health nurse
- **Maternal and Child Health Line** Tel. **13 22 29**
- **Parentline Victoria** Tel. **13 22 89**
- **Tweddle Child and Family Health Service** Tel. **(03) 9689 1577**

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