



Temper Tantrums

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Picture this: Your eighteen-month-old son is busy playing. Toys are spread all over the living room. His hair is messy and he has banana smeared on his shirt from his afternoon snack. It's time to clean up and get him changed.

But your child has different ideas. At first he ignores you when you say, "It's time to clean up." When you pick him up to change his clothes, he slips into a full-blown tantrum. Arms and legs are flying. His face is red and streaked with tears. He yells "NO, NO, NO!" What should you do?



When do tantrums occur and why?

If you have a young child, scenes like this aren't unusual. Independent toddlers and preschoolers don't always like to be told what to do. While you're setting rules for your child, he's attempting to gain his independence. It's not surprising that the two of you will clash from time to time.

Tantrums are also common when children are told no. "No, you can't watch a video right now," or, "No cookies before dinner." Children may throw tantrums to get what they want or to get your attention. Remember, from the point of view of toddlers, the world revolves around them and what they want. This is typical thinking for young children.

At times tantrums come without warning. This is more likely to happen when children are very tired. Or they may be frustrated. Perhaps a child is having trouble putting a puzzle together or fitting clothes on a doll. Sometimes new situations or lots of activity are more than toddlers or preschoolers can handle. They can't always express their feelings in words. At times they lose control.

What should parents do?

Make sure children are safe. Tantrums are frightening for parents and children. Tantrums can be dangerous. Children can hurt themselves by bumping their heads or hitting their swinging arms or legs on furniture. When you face a tantrum, begin responding by making sure your child is safe. A safe area may be on a carpet in the middle of a room.

If your child is in a room with breakable items or near stairs, move your child. Some people advise moving children to their cribs or playpens. They'll be safe, but may learn to dislike these places. They may resist when it's time to sleep or play in them. If you do put your child in a crib or playpen, say, "I'll put you here so you won't hurt yourself." Remain in sight.

When a tantrum happens and you're away from home it's much more difficult to keep your child safe and to remain calm. Yet spanking your child or screaming at him won't solve the problem. Nor will letting him have his way; if you give in to him you'll encourage his tantrums. Instead calmly remove your child to a quiet and safe place. You may go to a rest room, a grassy area, or even to the back seat of your car where he can finish his tantrum away from onlookers. It will be easier to deal with a tantrum if neither of you has an audience. Remain calm, composed and determined. Your child will begin to realize that acting out is a waste of his time as well as yours.

Stay calm. Don't hold, laugh, smile or punish your child. If your child is out of control, *you must stay in control.* Getting involved in a tantrum is likely to make it worse. You might say, "When you calm down, I'll try to help you."



Then, ignore your child even when it's difficult to listen to her screams. You may feel angry or helpless. Remember though, your child needs your patience and support, and time to calm down. Stay close by.

Don't give in. If you give into a tantrum, your child may learn to use tantrums to get what he or she wants. For example, if he is allowed to stay in dirty clothes because he has a tantrum, your child may throw a tantrum the next time you ask him to change clothes. Also, don't buy a toy or give a forbidden food to stop a tantrum.

If you have given in to tantrums in the past, you and your child will need some time to adjust to the change. For awhile, your child will expect you to give in. When you take a firm stand the tantrums will probably get worse. But don't give in. After a few times of acting out, your toddler will realize that tantrums won't get him what he wants.

Don't punish. It won't help to lecture, scold, spank, slap or punish your child in any way. Children become caught up in their tantrums. Often they don't remember what started a temper tantrum. Their actions and feelings scare them and they can't gain control. The physical and emotional pain of a spanking or scolding only makes them feel more frightened and out of control.

When your child calms down, try to be sympathetic. You may feel you are letting your child get away with a tantrum. It's not that simple. It's important to recognize that your child was able to calm himself or herself down. This is important for your child to learn. Tell him or her that it pleases you. You might say, "You really felt angry, I'm glad you were able to calm down."

Labeling and talking about feelings will also help, "You were angry when you couldn't get that puzzle together. The next time you have trouble with your puzzle, ask me to help you." Later, your child will learn to tell you when he or she feels angry, tired or frustrated. When children can talk about their feelings, they are less likely to throw tantrums.

Preventing tantrums

Tantrums usually decrease when children learn how to talk about their feelings and ask for help. Until then, look for patterns. Do tantrums occur more frequently in certain situations? Do they happen at a certain time of day? Do they happen when you go shopping or right before meals? Try to think of changes that may help your child avoid tantrums. Maybe you can arrange a child-care swap so you can go to the store by yourself. Maybe you can change the time of naps or meals so your child doesn't become too tired or too hungry.

Here are some additional tips that may help prevent temper tantrums:

- Be firm, but give choices whenever possible. “It’s time for lunch. Would you like to wash your hands by yourself or would you like me to help you wash before you come to the table?” “I want to keep you safe in this parking lot. Would you like to hold my hand or would you like me to carry you?” “It’s time to get your coat on. Do you want me to help you put it on or would you like to try getting it on yourself?”
- When you ask your toddler to do something, use a friendly tone of voice. But don’t give her a choice when none exists. When you say, “Would you like to come to lunch?” or “It’s time for lunch, okay?” you are giving your child a choice when none exists. Don’t be surprised when she says, “NO!”
- Don’t overreact when your child says “No.” You might try saying, “I know you don’t want to go to bed, but it’s time. Would you like me to sing you a song or read you a book after you’re in your crib?”
- Reward your child when she does what you have asked her to do by thanking her and giving her your attention. “Thank you for washing your hands. Now we can enjoy our lunch together!”

Dealing with tantrums is difficult for parents. A tantrum can leave parents feeling exhausted, angry and guilty. As hard as it is, keep calm and don’t give up. Children need their parents to teach them to understand and control their feelings.

Sources:

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