

Temper Tantrums: A Normal Part of Growing Up



It's hard for young children to hold strong feelings inside. When they feel frustrated or angry, they often cry, scream, or stomp up and down. This is a temper tantrum.

Temper tantrums are a normal part of your children's development. They usually begin around 12 to 18 months of age, get worse between 2 and 3 years, and taper off after that, once children are able to use words to communicate their wants and needs.

Here is information from the American Academy of Pediatrics to help parents understand temper tantrums and how best to deal with them.

Why do children have temper tantrums?

During the toddler years, there is a change in how children process information. They suddenly become more aware that their world can change. They realize they won't always get what they expect or want. Their young minds are easily overwhelmed, and they don't know how to cope with change or how to deal with not getting their way.

A lot of things can trigger a tantrum. For example, children may have a temper tantrum because they

- Do not understand what you are saying or asking
- Are upset when others cannot understand them
- Do not know how to tell you how they feel or what they need
- Do not know how to solve problems on their own
- Have an illness or other problem that keeps them from expressing how they feel
- Are hungry
- Are tired
- Are anxious or uncomfortable
- Are reacting to stress or changes at home
- Are jealous, want what other children have, or want the attention others receive
- Are not be able to do as much as they think they can, such as walking, running, climbing, drawing, or making toys work

How to prevent temper tantrums

Temper tantrums are a normal part of growing up, but you may be able to prevent some from happening.

What you can do

- Encourage your children to use words to tell you how they are feeling. Try to suggest words they can use to describe their feelings.
- Set reasonable limits, and don't expect your children to be perfect. Give simple reasons for the rules, and don't change them.
- Keep to a daily routine as much as possible so your children know what to expect.

- Distract your children. Try a new game, book, or toy. Sometimes a change in location can prevent a tantrum. For example, if you are indoors, go outside to look for birds in the sky.
- Avoid situations that frustrate your children, such as playing with toys that are too advanced.
- Avoid long outings during which your children have to sit still or cannot play. If you have to take a trip, bring along a favorite book or toy.
- Have healthy snacks ready for when your children get hungry.
- Make sure your children are well rested.
- Be choosy about saying no. When you say no to everything, it can frustrate your children. Consider saying yes sometimes. Of course, if your children's safety is at stake, don't say yes just to avoid a tantrum. Praise your children when they do something good that otherwise might have led to frustration.
- Give choices. For example, make it clear that while they have to take a bath, they can make some choices on their own. Try saying, "It's time for your bath. Would you like to walk upstairs or have me carry you?" Be sure the choices you offer are also acceptable to you.
- Set a good example. Avoid arguing or yelling in front of your children.

How to handle tantrums

What you can do

- **Let the tantrum end itself.** Once children begin a tantrum, only they can end it. Allow them the time and space to be left alone (in a safe place) to let the tantrum run its course. All tantrums end, almost always by a child's path to resolution. Trying to end one early usually delays the child's resolution.
- **Try to stay calm.** If you shout or get angry, it can make things worse. If you can't stay calm, leave the room. Wait a minute or two, or until the crying stops, before returning.
- **Offer a cooling down time.** During a tantrum, it's helpful for parents to let children not only manage their tantrum but also know there is a safe place and safe time for them to do so. It can be called a cooling-down time and place or a time-out.
- **Ignore minor displays of anger, such as crying, screaming, or kicking.** Try touching or holding your children to calm them. Or, try standing nearby without talking until they calm down. If your children have tantrums in a public place, take them home or to the car.

Some behaviors are *not* OK and should not be ignored, such as

- Hitting or kicking people
- Throwing things that might hurt someone or break something
- Screaming or yelling for a long time

If these things happen, take your children away from the problem. Say firmly, "No hitting," or "No throwing," to make sure your children know these behaviors are not OK.

What not to do

- **Never punish your children for temper tantrums.** They may start to keep their anger or frustration inside, which can be unhealthy. Keep in mind that as your children grow, they will learn to deal with their strong emotions.
- **Do not give in to your children just to stop a tantrum.** This teaches your children that temper tantrums get them what they want. Also, don't feel guilty about saying no to your children. Set the rules and stick with them. When parents change the rules, it is harder for children to understand which rules are firm and which ones are not. Discuss with those who care for your children which rules are really needed and how to be firm about them.

When temper tantrums are serious

Your children should have fewer temper tantrums by 3½ years of age. Between tantrums, their behavior should seem normal and healthy. If the outbursts are severe or happen too often, they may be an early sign of emotional problems. Talk with your children's doctor if your children seem to have difficulty expressing themselves with words (compared with other children the same age), cause harm to themselves or others, or hold their breath and faint, or if tantrums get worse after 4 years of age. Your children's doctor will make sure no physical or emotional problems are causing the tantrums. He or she can also give you advice to help you deal with these outbursts.

It is important to realize that temper tantrums are a normal part of growing up. While tantrums are not always easy to deal with, a loving and understanding approach will help you and your children get through them.

Breath-holding spells

Some children, when upset and crying very hard, hold their breath after taking a big breath. They can even hold their breath to the point of passing out. It is not done on purpose but may happen when children are upset, such as during a temper tantrum. While these episodes can be scary for parents, rest assured that they are usually harmless and your children will grow out of them. If you are concerned about your children's behavior, talk with your children's doctor.

Keeping your children safe

Many times you will have to tell your children no to protect them from harm or injury. For example, the kitchen and bathroom can be dangerous places for your children. They may not understand why you will not let them play there. This can cause a tantrum. However, it's more important to keep your children safe.

Childproof your home, and make dangerous areas or objects off-limits. Keep an eye on your children at all times. Never leave them alone in a situation that could be hazardous. Take away dangerous objects and replace them with something safe. It is up to you to keep your children safe.

The information contained in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

From your doctor

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