



TEMPER TANTRUMS

A temper tantrum is an immature way of expressing anger or frustration. Most 1-3 year olds will throw tantrums from time to time. Your child must learn that his temper tantrum will not affect a decision you have made. Teach your child that anger is normal but that it must be channeled appropriately. By 3 years of age, you can begin to encourage your child to verbalize his feelings (“You feel angry because...”). By school age, temper tantrums should be rare. When your child reaches adolescence, remind your teenager that blowing up is inappropriate. Help him develop frustration-managing techniques, like counting to ten, to help him regain control.

RESPONSES TO TEMPER TANTRUMS

Overall, praise your child when he controls his temper, verbally expresses his anger, and is cooperative. Be a good model by staying calm and not screaming or having adult tantrums. Avoid spanking because it suggests to your child that you are out of control.

Different types of temper tantrums require different responses to help bring the situation back into control.

Support and help children having frustration or fatigue related tantrums.

Children often have temper tantrums when they are frustrated with themselves. They may be frustrated because they cannot put something together. Young children may be frustrated because their parents do not understand their speech. Older children may be frustrated with their inability to do their homework.

At these times your child needs encouragement and a parent who listens. Put an arm around him and say something that shows understanding such as “I know it’s hard, but you’ll get better at it. Is there something I can do to help you?” Also give praise for not giving up. Some of these tantrums can be prevented by steering your child away from tasks that he cannot do well yet.

Children tend to have more temper tantrums when they are tired (for example, when they have missed a nap) because they are less able to cope with frustrating situations. At these times, put your child to bed. Hunger can contribute to temper tantrums. If you suspect this, give your child a snack. Temper tantrums also increase during sickness.

Ignore attention-seeking or demanding-type tantrums

Young children may throw temper tantrums to get their way. They may want to go with you rather than be left with the babysitter, want candy, want to empty a desk drawer, or want to go outside in bad weather. Tantrums for attention may include whining, crying,

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pounding or hitting the floor or door, slamming a door, or breath holding. As long as your child stays in one place and is not too disruptive, you can leave him alone.

If you recognize that a certain event is going to push your child over the edge, try to shift his attention to something else. However, do not give into your child's demand. During a temper tantrum, if his behavior is harmless, ignore it completely. Once a tantrum has started, it rarely can be stopped by the parent. Move away, even to a different room, so your child no longer has an audience.

Do not try to reason with your child. Simply state, "I can see you're very angry. I'll leave you alone until you calm down. Let me know if you want to talk." Let your child regain control. After the tantrum, be friendly and try to return things to normal.

Physically move children have refusal-type or avoidance-type tantrums.

If your child refuses something unimportant (such as a snack), let it go before a tantrum begins. However, if your child must do something important, such as get into a carseat or go to daycare, he should not be able to avoid it by having a tantrum.

Giving your child a 5-minute warning instead of asking him suddenly to stop what he is doing can prevent some of these tantrums. Once a tantrum has begun, let your child have the tantrum for 2-3 minutes. Try to put his displeasure into words: "You want to play some more, but it's bedtime." Then take him to the intended destination (for example, the bed), helping him as much as is needed (including carrying).

Use time-outs for disruptive-type tantrums

Some temper tantrums are too disruptive or aggressive for parents to ignore. On such occasions, send or take your child to his room for 2 to 5 minutes. Examples of disruptive behavior include:

- Clinging to you or following you around during the tantrum.
- Hitting you.
- Screaming or yelling for an extended period of time.
- Having a temper tantrum in a public place such as a restaurant or church.

(Move your child to another place for his time-out. The rights of the other people need to be protected.)

- Throwing something or damaging property during a temper tantrum.

Hold children having harmful or rage-type tantrums

If your child is totally out of control and is screaming wildly, consider holding him. His loss of control probably scares him. Also hold your child when he is having tantrums

that carry a danger of self-injury (such as if he is violently throwing himself backward). Take your child in your arms, tell him you know he is angry, and offer him your sense of control. Hold him until you feel his body start to relax. This usually takes 1 to 3 minutes. Then let him go. This comforting response is rarely needed after 3 years of age.

Call Our Office for an Appointment If...

- Your child has hurt himself or others during tantrums.
- The tantrums occur five or more times per day.
- The tantrums also occur in school.
- Your child has several other behavior problems.
- One of the parents has tantrums or screaming bouts and cannot give them up.
- This approach does not bring improvement within 2 weeks.
- You have other questions or concerns.

See also: our handout about Discipline