

Temper Tantrums

What is a Temper Tantrum?

A temper tantrum is when a young child has an extreme behavioral reaction to overwhelming negative emotions. Tantrums may start small with whimpering, whining, or looking frustrated, and then escalate into screaming, kicking, sobbing, or hitting. A child might throw himself on the floor or hold his breath. Some tantrums escalate slowly, others very quickly.

Temper tantrums feel out of control to the child, and can be frightening to the child as well as to the child's parent.

Temper tantrums often begin between 12 and 18 months, and are commonly seen in 2- 4- year-olds. Tantrums occur because a child's emotions can be more powerful than their ability to manage them.

Why Children Have Tantrums

Tantrums happen because your child's feelings develop before her ability to understand and manage those feelings. Here are the seven main reasons they occur:

- 1. They want to do something that is not allowed.** Rules are rules and sometimes children disagree with the rules or limits being set.
- 2. Children want to be able to do more than they are able to do.** Tantrums may result from the child asserting his or her independence. They may want to do something that they don't yet fully have the ability to do (like zip a zipper), or that a parent must prevent for safety reasons (such as buckle their own car seat).
- 3. Children can't always communicate their needs or wants.** A toddler's cognitive and physical skills often develop more quickly than the ability to communicate with words. The development of language skills often helps reduce the frequency of tantrums.



- 4. Children are physically uncomfortable or don't feel good.** Temper tantrums can occur because a child is tired, hungry, or feeling frustrated.
- 5. Children can't get your attention.** Children may also throw tantrums to get attention, to get their own way, or to try to get a reaction. Keep in mind that although their original desire was to get a response, once a tantrum starts they are caught up in their emotions. The attention they were looking for from a parent or teacher might not stop the tantrum even when it is provided.
- 6. The child can't help it.** Some children are temperamentally prone to tantrums. Frustration, anger, or physical discomfort can be extremely overwhelming for some young children.
- 7. Children are developing emotional regulation.** Children need time to develop their capacity to regulate their emotions, support from caregivers to identify their feelings, and skills to manage their emotions in situations where they are likely to lose control.

Action: What Parents Can Do

PREVENTING TANTRUMS

- ★ Children are more prone to tantrums when they are tired, overstimulated, or are outside of their normal routine. Knowing what can push a young child into a tantrum can help parents prevent tantrums from starting.
- ★ Plan for success. For example, avoid the grocery store when your child is tired, or take the child home from the park before she is hungry for dinner.
- ★ Note early cues, and offer support by recognizing the signs and naming the child's emotions.
- ★ Ask if your child wants help with a task that is frustrating or offer an activity you can do together.
- ★ Set expectations. For example, give the child a 5 minute warning before leaving a friend's house.



MANAGING A TANTRUM

- ★ Consider the child's age, developmental level, environment, and typical level of emotional regulation to decide what methods might work the best.
- ★ Be aware of your own feelings, remembering that the child feels out of control and needs you to be calm.
- ★ When necessary, make sure your child is safe and then step away to gain control of your own feelings before attempting to help the child.
- ★ Acknowledge the child's feelings, but don't expect him to be able to talk about them while the tantrum is going on.
- ★ A statement like "I'm going to help you calm down" can be reassuring to the child and also let her know that your expectation is that she will begin to regain control of her behavior.
- ★ Offer an alternative activity. This is sometimes also called "distraction," and can be very effective with younger children.
- ★ If the child is in a safe place, some experts advise ignoring the tantrum to remove the child's incentive to continue. Be sure to respond positively when the child finds other ways to get your attention.

HAVING A PLAN

- ★ Talk to your child about tantrums when she is NOT upset. Talk about how bad she felt and how you were upset too. Think together about how she might let you know next time she feels upset so that you can help her avoid a tantrum.
- ★ If your child asks for help, give him help. A preschooler is inexperienced at managing strong emotions, and talking about them together is a great way for him to learn and practice.
- ★ Let a child know when he has done a good job of managing his feelings when you knew he was stressed, tired, or upset. This can help him understand that he has alternatives to losing control.
- ★ Remember that the road to emotional regulation is a long one, and tantrums can be expected along the way.