



TAME THOSE TANTRUMS

A tantrum is an uncontrolled outburst or expression of anger and frustration by a young child caught up in the challenges of the moment.

Why do tantrums happen? Perhaps your child is having trouble understanding why he can't have something you gave him once before, can't figure something out, or is unable to complete a specific task. Maybe your child is struggling to use his words to express his thoughts or feelings. Whatever the challenge, frustration with a particular situation might trigger explosive anger — resulting in a temper tantrum.

As adults, our threshold for frustration is much lower when we are thirsty, hungry, or tired. The same is true even more so for a child. When a child is thirsty, hungry, or tired, tantrums are more likely to occur.

Do young children have tantrums on purpose? For most toddlers, tantrums are simply a way of expressing frustration. Planning tantrums is a little too cognitively advanced for very young children. For older children, tantrums are usually a learned behavior. When parents reward tantrums by giving in to what the child is demanding or allow the child to get out of a situation or expectation by throwing a tantrum — the tantrums will likely continue.

Typically, the best way to respond to a tantrum is to ignore it. When your child quiets down after a tantrum, you might say, "Tantrums won't get my attention. If you need or want to tell me something, you have to use your words." If your child is non-verbal, show them simple signs or gestures that can get their point across.

Should we put children in time-out for having a tantrum? Clinical evidence shows that time-outs don't work unless parents practice "time-ins" (purposeful encouragement of good behavior). When our children are behaving well, we need to let them know and reward them with verbal praise, doing something fun together, a smile, or a hug.

Is there a way to prevent tantrums? There is no foolproof way to prevent tantrums, but there are many things parents can do to divert them, even with the youngest children. Consider the following:

- **Be consistent.** Establish and stick to daily routines (including nap time and bedtime) so your child knows exactly what to expect and when.
- **Set reasonable limits and follow them consistently.** Plan errands ahead of time and go when your child isn't likely to be hungry or tired. If you're expecting to have to wait in line, pack a small toy or sing a song together to occupy your child's attention.
- **Encourage your child to use words.** Young children understand many more words than they're able to express. If your child isn't speaking yet or speaking clearly, teach him simple sign language for words such as "I want," "more," "drink," "hurt," and "tired." The easier it is for your child to communicate with you, the less likely you are to witness a tantrum. As your child gets older, help him or her put feelings into words.
- **Give your child a sense of control by letting him make choices.** "Would you like to wear your red shirt or your blue shirt... eat strawberries or bananas...read a book together, or build a tower with your blocks?" Then compliment your child on making a "good" choice.
- **Beware of the sadness trap.** When you comfort your child in the middle of a tantrum, you are reinforcing the bad behavior. It's best to ignore the behavior while it's happening. Afterward, offer support and sympathy and talk with your child about how to regulate his or her emotions. Instead, say "I'm sorry you got upset. Now that you are calm, we can talk about what just happened. I'm not going to talk to you when you're behaving like that."
- **Praise good behavior.** Give a hug, extra attention, and always tell your child how proud you are when he or she shares toys, follows directions, etc. If you sense frustration brewing, suggest a new activity, change location, or use other distractions to change your child's focus. Avoid situations that are likely to trigger tantrums.
- **Stay calm and in control.** When you're in control, your child feels secure. We want to show children that it isn't appropriate to have outbursts, and the best way to do this is to avoid having our own outbursts, especially as a reaction to their tantrum.

When do children "get over" having tantrums? As your child's self-control improves, tantrums should become less frequent. Most children outgrow tantrums by age five, but if your young child's tantrums seem especially severe, your older child is having frequent tantrums, or the tantrums have pushed you beyond your ability to cope, share your concerns with your child's doctor. ✨

This informational handout was created as part of UCP's Childcare Enhancement with a Purpose program, funded by DHR. For more information please visit www.ucphuntsville.org

Source: *Becky L. Spivey, M.Ed. from superduperinc.com.*

