

Temper Tantrums

Temper tantrums range from whining and crying to screaming, kicking, hitting and breath holding. They're equally common in boys and girls and usually occur between the ages of 1 to 3.

Kids' temperaments vary dramatically. Some kids may experience regular tantrums, whereas others have them rarely. They're a normal part of development and don't have to be seen as something negative.

Tantrums are common during the second year of life, a time when children are acquiring language. Toddlers generally understand more than they can express. Imagine not being able to communicate your needs to someone, a frustrating experience that may precipitate a tantrum. As language skills improve, tantrums tend to decrease.

Another task toddlers are faced with is an increasing need for autonomy. Toddlers want a sense of independence and control over the environment, more than they may be capable of handling. This creates the perfect condition for power struggles as a child thinks "I can do it myself" or "I want it, give it to me." When kids discover that they can't do it and can't have everything they want, the stage is set for a tantrum.

Avoiding tantrums

The best way to deal with temper tantrums is to avoid them in the first place, whenever possible. Here are some strategies that may help:

- **Make sure your child isn't acting up simply because he isn't getting enough attention.** Although this is hard to imagine, to a child, negative attention (a parent's response to a tantrum) is better than no attention at all. Try to establish a habit of catching your child being good ("time in"), which means rewarding your little one with attention for positive behavior.
- **Try to give toddlers some control over little things.** Offer minor choices such as "Do you want orange juice or apple juice?"
- **Keep off-limits objects out of sight and out of reach to make struggles less likely to develop over them.** Obviously, this isn't always possible, especially outside of the home where the environment can't be controlled.
- **Distract your child.** Take advantage of your little one's short attention span by offering a replacement for the coveted object, beginning a new activity or simply change the environment by moving to a different room.

- **Help kids learn new skills and succeed.** Help kids learn to do things. Praise them to help them feel proud of what they can do. Also, start with something simple before moving on to more challenging tasks.
- **Consider the request carefully when your child wants something.** Is it outrageous? Maybe it isn't. Choose your battles; accommodate when you can.
- **Know your child's limits.** If you know your toddler is tired, it's not the best time to go grocery shopping or to try to squeeze in one more errand.

If a safety issue is involved and a toddler repeats the forbidden behavior after being told to stop, use a time-out or hold the child firmly for several minutes. Be consistent. Kids must understand that you are inflexible on safety issues.

Tantrum tactics

The most important thing to keep in mind when you're faced with a child in the throes of a tantrum is simple and crucial: Keep cool. Take deep breaths and try to think clearly.

Your child relies on you to be the example. Hitting and spanking don't help; physical tactics send the message that using force and physical punishment is OK and can actually result in an increase of negative behaviors over the long run.

Tantrums should be handled differently depending on the cause. Try to understand where your child is coming from. For example, if your little one has just had a great disappointment, you may need to provide comfort.

It's a different situation when the tantrum follows a child being refused something. Toddlers have fairly simple reasoning skills, so you aren't likely to get far with explanations. Ignoring the outburst is one way to handle it if the tantrum poses no threat to your child or others. Continue your activities, paying no attention to your child but remaining within sight.

Kids who are in danger of hurting themselves or others during a tantrum should be taken to a quiet, safe place to calm down. This also applies to tantrums in public places.

Preschoolers and older kids are more likely to use tantrums to get their way if they've learned that this behavior works. Once kids have started school, it's appropriate to send them to their rooms to cool off.

Rather than setting a specific time limit, tell your child to stay in the room until he regains control. This is empowering because kids can affect the outcome by their own actions, and thus gain a sense of control that was lost during the tantrum. However, if the time-out is for negative behavior (such as hitting) in addition to a tantrum, set a time limit.

Temper Tantrums (continued)

After the storm

Do **not** reward your child's tantrum by giving in. This will only prove to your little one that the tantrum was effective. Instead, verbally praise a child for regaining control.

Also, kids may be especially vulnerable after a tantrum when they know they've been less than adorable. Now (when your child is calm) is the time for a hug and reassurance that your child is loved, no matter what.

Make sure your child is getting enough sleep. With too little sleep, kids can become hyper, disagreeable, and have extremes in behavior. Getting enough sleep can dramatically reduce tantrums.

When to call the doctor

You should consult your doctor if:

- You often feel angry or out of control when you respond to tantrums.
- You keep giving in.
- The tantrums cause a lot of bad feelings between you and your child.
- You have questions about what you're doing or what your child is doing.
- The tantrums become more frequent, intense, or last longer.
- Your child often hurts himself/herself or others.
- Your child seems very disagreeable, argues a lot, and hardly ever cooperates.

Your doctor also can check for any physical problems that may be contributing to the tantrums, although this is not common.

Remember, tantrums usually aren't cause for concern and generally stop on their own. As kids mature, they gain self-control. They learn to cooperate, communicate, and cope with frustration. Less frustration and more control mean fewer tantrums — and happier parents.