
PARENTS' GUIDE TO BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS

How to deal with temper tantrums

By Barton D. Schmitt, MD

THE PROBLEM

No matter how calm and gentle a parent you are, your child will probably throw some temper tantrums. These outbursts can be upsetting and frustrating for all concerned. A temper tantrum is an immature way of expressing anger. We need to teach children that anger is normal, but it must be channeled appropriately. Your child needs to learn

that temper tantrums don't work, that you don't change your mind because of them. By 3 years of age, you can begin to teach him to verbalize his feelings ("You feel angry because . . ."). By school age, temper tantrums should be rare. During adolescence, tantrums reappear, but your teenager can be reminded that blowing up creates a bad impression and that counting to ten can help him regain control.

THE CAUSES

Children often have temper tantrums when they are frustrated with themselves or others. A child may become frustrated because he can't put a toy together, for example. Young children may be frustrated because their parents don't understand what

they are trying to say. Older children may be frustrated by inability to do a homework assignment. Another major reason children have tantrums is to get attention or get their own way. Children tend to have more temper tantrums when they are tired, hungry, or sick.

THE RESPONSE

In general, 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 for tantrums because it conveys to your child that you are out of control. Try using the following responses to the different types of temper tantrums.

Support and help children having frustration- or fatigue-related tantrums. When your child is having a tantrum because he is frustrated, he needs encouragement and a parent who listens. Put an arm

around him and say something brief 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 praise the child for not giving up. Some frustration tantrums can be prevented by steering your child away from tasks he can't do well.

Children tend to have more temper tantrums when they are tired (when they've missed a nap, for example) because they are less able to cope with frustrating situations. At these times, put your child to bed. If you suspect that hunger is contributing to a tantrum, give your child a snack.

Ignore attention-seeking or demanding tantrums. Young children may throw temper tantrums because they may want to go with you rather than be left with the baby-sitter, want candy, want to empty a desk drawer, or want to go outside in bad

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weather. They don't accept rules for their safety. Or they may seek your attention by whining, crying, pounding the floor or wall, slamming a door, or breath-holding. As long as your child stays in one place during such tantrums 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. Don't give in to his demands, however. During the tantrum, if his behavior is harmless, ignore it completely. Once a tantrum has started, it rarely can be stopped.

Move away, even to a different room, so that your child no longer has an audience. Don't try to reason with the child; it will only make the tantrum worse. Simply state, "I can see you're very angry. I'll leave you alone until you cool off. 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. You can prevent some demand-type tantrums by saying No less often.

If necessary, physically move children having refusal-type tantrums. If your child refuses to do something unimportant, such as eating a snack or lying down in bed, let it go before a tantrum begins. If your child refuses to do something important, however, such as going to bed or to day care, do not allow him to avoid it by having a tantrum.

Some refusal tantrums can be prevented by giving your child a five-minute warning instead of asking him suddenly to stop what he's doing. Once a tantrum has begun, let it go on for two or three minutes. Try to put the child's displeasure into words: "You want to play some more, but it's bedtime." Then take him to the intended destination, helping him as much as needed, including carrying him.

Use time-outs for disruptive tantrums. Some temper tantrums are too disruptive for parents to ignore. On such occasions, send your child to his room for two to five minutes. Examples of disruptive behavior during tantrums include:

- Clinging to you or following you around

- Hitting you
- Screaming or yelling for such a long time that it gets on your nerves
- Having a temper tantrum in a public place such as a restaurant or church (in such a case, move your child to another place for his time-out. The rights of other people need to be protected.)
- Throwing things or damaging property.

Hold children having harmful or rage-type tantrums. If your child is totally out of control and screaming wildly, consider holding him. His loss of control probably scares him. Also hold your child when his tantrums carry a danger of self-injury, as when he is throwing himself backward violently.

Take your child in your arms, tell him you know he is angry, and offer him your sense of control. Hold him until his body starts to relax. This usually takes one to three minutes. Then let him go. This comforting response is rarely needed after 3 years of age.

Some children won't want you to comfort them. Hold your child only if it helps. If your child says "go away," do so. After the tantrum subsides, your child will often want to be held briefly. This is a good way to get him back into the family activities.

Call our office during regular hours if:

- This approach does not bring improvement within two weeks.
- Your child has hurt himself or others during tantrums.
- The tantrums occur ten or more times per day.
- Your child has two or more other behavioral problems.
- You or your spouse have problems controlling your temper, perhaps even tantrums or screaming bouts that you can't give up.
- You have other questions or concerns.

Adapted from Schmitz SO: *Your Child's Health*. New York, Bantam Books, Inc., 1987.
The parent information ad on temper tantrums may be photocopied and distributed to parents and patients without permission of the publisher.

Managing normal tantrums: 10 Ten tips for parents

1. Minimize the need to say NO by storing breakable items and, where possible, dangerous furniture.
2. Use distraction: When frustration begins to mount, redirect the child to a less frustrating or more acceptable activity.
3. Present choices within the limits of what is acceptable: "Do you want to wear your red pajamas or your blue ones?"
4. Pick your battles carefully. The more important the issue – e.g., safety precautions – the more likely you are to be firm and consistent.
5. When a preschool child throws a tantrum, stay within the child's sight, carrying on normal activities without talking to him. Some preschoolers need to be held in order to regain control.
6. For the older child, establish the rule that he must go to his room until he calms down. When a tantrum occurs, tell him to leave, but do not lecture, threaten, or argue. Model self-control.
7. Take into account your own emotions that may interfere with effective management of a tantrum. Never let a child hurt himself, or others, including you, during a tantrum. A child who is in danger of hurting himself (by thrashing around on a hard floor, for example) should be moved to a safer place.
8. Use words like "out of control" instead of "bad child" to describe tantrum-throwing behavior, and praise the child's ability to regain control after a tantrum. You might say, "You did a good job getting yourself under control."
9. Once a tantrum is over, the child is entitled to start over with a clean slate. Comfort may be given, but any original demands the child had should not be fulfilled. Otherwise, tantrums will become a way of life.
10. Try to establish an environment of positive reinforcement in the household, by commenting on and praising desirable or neutral behavior every few minutes as a general habit.

Books for Parents

1. Fraiberg, Selma: *The Magic Years*. New York, Scribners, 1969, pp 146-176, "The Building of a Conscience." A readable, psychoanalytically informed approach.
2. Leach, Penelope: *Babyhood*. New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1987, pp 392-396, "Fears and Phobias: Tears and Tantrums." Clear, developmentally informed chapter, which also discusses breath-holding spells.
3. Rubin, Richard R, John Fisher and Susan Doering : *Your Toddler*. New York, Macmillan (Johnson & Johnson Child Development Publications), 1980, pp 125-111, "Surviving Temper Tantrums." More of a how-to approach, with wonderful photographs.
4. Schmitt, Barton D: *Your Child's Health*. New York, Bantam Books, 1987, pp 208-213. Clearly written with specific, easily understood suggestions.
5. Spock, Benjamin, and Michael B. Rothenberg: *Dr. Spock's Baby and Child Care*. New York, Pocket Books, 1985, pp 404-405. A brief but sensitive handling.

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