

Temper Tantrums: A Normal Part of Growing Up



It's hard for young children to hold strong feelings inside. When they feel frustrated or angry, they often cry, scream, or stomp up and down. This is a temper tantrum. Temper tantrums are a normal part of your child's development. They usually begin around age 12 to 18 months, get worse between 2 and 3 years, then taper off after that, once children are able to use words to communicate their wants and needs. This publication was written by the American Academy of Pediatrics to help parents understand temper tantrums and how best to deal with them.

Why do children have temper tantrums?

Young children are busy learning about their world. They are eager to take control. However, learning to control temper can be one of the hardest lessons of all. A lot of things can frustrate a child and lead to temper tantrums. For example, your child may

- Not understand what you are saying or asking
- Be upset when others cannot understand her
- Not know how to tell you how she feels or what she needs
- Not know how to solve problems on her own
- Have an illness or other problem that keeps her from expressing how she feels
- Be hungry
- Be tired
- Be anxious or uncomfortable
- Be reacting to stress or changes at home
- Be jealous, want what other children have, or want the attention others receive
- Not be able to do as much as she thinks she can, like walking, running, climbing, drawing, or making toys work

How to help prevent temper tantrums

While you can't prevent all tantrums, the following tips may help avoid them:

- Encourage your child to use words to tell you how he is feeling. Try to suggest words he can use to describe his feelings.
- Set reasonable limits and don't expect your child to be perfect. Give simple reasons for the rules and don't change them.
- Keep to a daily routine as much as possible so your child knows what to expect.
- Avoid situations that frustrate your child, like playing with toys that are too advanced.
- Avoid long outings where your child has to sit still or cannot play. If you have to take a trip, bring along a favorite book or toy.
- Have healthy snacks ready for when your child gets hungry.
- Make sure your child is well rested.

- Be choosy about saying no. When you say no to everything, it can frustrate your child. Consider saying yes sometimes. Of course, if your child's safety is at stake, don't say yes just to avoid a tantrum. Praise your child when he does something good that otherwise might have led to frustration.
- Give choices. For example, make it clear that while he has to take a bath, he can make some choices on his own. Try saying, "It's time for your bath. Would you like to walk upstairs or have me carry you?" Be sure the choices you offer are also acceptable to you.
- Set a good example. Avoid arguing or yelling in front of your child.

How to handle tantrums

What you can do

- **Try to stay calm.** If you shout or get angry, it can make things worse. If you can't stay calm, leave the room. Wait a minute or two, or until her crying stops, before returning.
- **Distract your child.** Try a new game, book, or toy. Sometimes something as simple as changing locations can prevent a tantrum. For example, if you are indoors, try taking your child outside to distract her attention.
- **Give your child a time-out.** Take your child away from the problem and give her time alone to calm down. A good rule of thumb for a time-out is 1 minute of time-out for every year of your child's age. For example, a 4-year-old would get a 4-minute time-out. After the time-out is over, talk with your child and make sure she understands why she got a time-out and how to deal with it next time. Don't use time-out too much or it won't work.
- **Ignore minor displays of anger such as crying, screaming, or kicking.** Try touching or holding your child to calm her. Or try standing nearby without talking until she calms down. If your child is having a tantrum in a public place, take her home or to the car.

Breath-holding spells

Some children, when upset and crying very hard, "forget" to breathe, and hold their breath until they pass out. It is not done on purpose, but can possibly happen when a child is upset, like during a temper tantrum. While these episodes can be scary for parents, rest assured that they are usually harmless and your child will grow out of them. If you are concerned about your child's behavior, talk with your child's doctor.

- Some behaviors are *not* OK and should not be ignored, such as
 - Hitting or kicking people
 - Throwing things that might hurt someone or break something
 - Screaming or yelling for a long time

If these things happen, take your child away from the problem. Say firmly, "No hitting" or "No throwing" to make sure your child knows these behaviors are not OK.

What *not* to do

- **Never punish your child for temper tantrums.** She may start to keep her anger or frustration inside, which can be unhealthy. Keep in mind that as your child grows, she will learn to deal with her strong emotions.
- **Do not give in to your child just to stop a tantrum.** This teaches your child that temper tantrums get her what she wants. Also, don't feel guilty about saying no to your child. Set the rules and stick with them. When parents change the rules, it is harder for children to understand which rules are firm and which ones are not. Discuss with those who care for your child which rules are really needed and how to be firm about them.

Keeping your child safe

Many times you will have to tell your child no to protect her from harm or injury. For example, the kitchen and bathroom can be dangerous places for your child. She may not understand why you will not let her play there. This can cause a tantrum. However, it's more important to keep your child safe.

Childproof your home and make dangerous areas or objects off-limits. Keep an eye on your child at all times. Never leave her alone in a situation that could be hazardous. Take away dangerous objects and replace them with something safe. It is up to you to keep your child safe.

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When temper tantrums are serious

Your child should have fewer temper tantrums by age 3½. Between tantrums, he should seem normal and healthy. If the outbursts are severe or happen too often, they may be an early sign of emotional problems. Talk with your child's doctor if your child seems to have difficulty expressing himself with words (compared with other children the same age), causes harm to himself or others, or holds his breath and faints, or if tantrums get worse after age 4. Your child's doctor will make sure there are no physical or emotional problems causing the tantrums. He or she can also give you advice to help you deal with these outbursts.

It is important to realize that temper tantrums are a normal part of growing up. While tantrums are not always easy to deal with, a loving and understanding approach will help you and your child get through them.

The information contained in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

From your doctor

The recommendations in this publication do not indicate an exclusive course of treatment or serve as a standard of medical care. Variations, taking into account individual circumstances, may be appropriate. Original document included as part of *Addressing Mental Health Concerns in Primary Care: A Clinician's Toolkit*. Copyright © 2010 American Academy of Pediatrics. All Rights Reserved. The American Academy of Pediatrics does not review or endorse any modifications made to this document and in no event shall the AAP be liable for any such changes.

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