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Temper Tantrums

The New York Times: A Field Guide to Taming Tantrums in Toddlers

Tantrums inspire anxiety in many parents. Type “how to tame tantrums” into a search engine, and you get hundreds of thousands of results. Given how destabilizing tantrums can be, this intensity of parental concern makes sense. Out of nowhere, your mostly polite, mostly well-behaved toddler turns into a monster, stomping and screaming if you don’t meet his demands. Tantrums can transform parents too, causing us to say and do things we will later regret, like yelling — or, worse, caving in to our children’s demands. But, with a little thoughtful preparation, you can learn to head off many tantrums before they start, and to react as calmly and constructively as possible when your kiddo does melt down.

For this guide, I consulted four child psychologists, along with several psychologist-approved guides to both general discipline and tantrum management. One overall takeaway is that tantrums, while unpleasant, are a normal part of child development — which means that learning to manage them (when you can’t prevent them) is an essential component of any parent’s skill set.

Understand that tantrums are normal toddler behavior.

Roughly 85 percent of 2- and 3-year-olds have tantrums, said Dr. Michael Potegal, Ph.D., a psychologist and associate professor at the University of Minnesota who researches tantrums. They generally begin to occur when children are between 12 and 15 months old, peak between 18 and 36 months, and continue until around age 4, [according to the National Association of School Psychologists](#).

Why is that? For one thing, young children lack the physical, motor and language skills to get what they want, which can understandably lead to frustration. (How would *you* feel if you wanted a spoon, but couldn’t reach the silverware drawer, and everyone thought you were saying “stool”?) As Dr. Daniel J. Siegel, M.D., a neuropsychiatrist, and Dr. Tina Payne Bryson, Ph.D., a psychotherapist, wrote in their book, “The Whole-Brain Child,” children in this age group “haven’t mastered the ability to use logic and words to express their feelings, and they live their lives completely in the moment.” This is why they seem oblivious to your concerns for safety, propriety, punctuality or whatever other reasons you may have for wanting your child to stop or start doing something

Consult your toolbox.

Just as every child is different, every tantrum is different, too. Since no one method will stop every tantrum every time for every child, our experts recommended familiarizing yourself with several different tantrum-taming techniques. Each of the following methods will become easier

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and more effective with practice. And fear not — your child will likely give you plenty of opportunities to practice.

Calmly offer to hug or to hold your child. To be clear, this does *not* mean physically restraining your child, or forcing him to hug you against his will. But an expression of your love and affection may reassure a child who is feeling overwhelmed.

Distract, distract, distract. If, for example, your child’s sibling has snatched his toy, you may be able to end the tantrum by offering him another one. Other forms of distraction worth trying include changing the setting by moving to a different room, or putting on your child’s favorite song. The distraction method tends to work better with younger kids, whose memories are shorter and who may forget their frustrations from one moment to the next.

Suggest self-calming techniques. This takes a little advanced planning, but older children can be taught techniques like taking deep breaths or counting backward, and can be reminded to try them when a tantrum strikes.

Ignore the tantrum. To be clear, this does not mean ignoring your child entirely: You should stay in the room and remain physically and emotionally available. You can, however, refuse to engage with the crying and screaming, and instead focus on helping your child with an unrelated need. “For example, if your kid is whining and crying because they can’t wear their favorite outfit,” said Dr. Vasco Lopes, Psy.D., an assistant professor of clinical psychology at Columbia University Irving Medical Center, “you can ignore that aspect of what they’re saying and still attend to them in other ways by, say, helping them go about putting their shoes on.” With older children, ignoring the tantrum will be particularly effective if, you can instead focus on behaviors that are worthy of positive attention. For example, if your child is still crying, but has stopped stomping her feet, praise her for that.

Serve a very short “timeout.” Timeout is a loaded term, so let’s be clear on what this method is not. It does not mean putting your child in the corner or sending him to his room as punishment. The timeout approach to tantrum management involves telling the child in a calm voice that you will wait for her to calm down, and that you look forward to talking again once that happens. This method is particularly useful when you yourself feel overwhelmed (you can even admit feeling this to your child as a way of expressing empathy).

Avoid recriminations.

After the tantrum is over, put it behind you. Resist the urge to admonish your child for the tantrum after the fact. Younger children might not even remember the tantrum or understand what you’re referring to, while older children might feel so ashamed that they tantrum all over again. If you feel a conversation is necessary, wait until after your child has calmed down. “As long as it’s short and positive and constructive, and not about reliving and shaming the tantrum,”

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Dr. Lopes said. “For one, it’s not going to prevent it from happening next time. And second, it can just reignite the flame of the tantrum if they’re feeling shameful or guilty about that.”

Plan ahead to avoid tantrum triggers.

Your child’s meltdowns may be easier to forecast than you think. Fatigue and hunger — common triggers for adult and toddler tantrums alike — are most acute at particular times of day. That explains why the likelihood of a tantrum tends to peak in mid-morning, and again in the late afternoon.

“That’s when a lot of us feel crappy” said Dr. Potegal. These are the times when Alzheimer’s patients get irritable, when babies’ colic kicks in and when you find yourself hankering for a cup of coffee at your desk. It’s particularly hard for toddlers to manage their emotions when they feel tired or hungry. As [research has shown](#), the prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain that controls social and emotional behavior, isn’t fully developed until we reach our 20s. Plan ahead by packing snacks when you venture out and, if possible, scheduling outings and activities around naps. Watch for tantrum warning signs, too, like extra-whiny or slightly manic behavior.

In the same way, try to look ahead to address your particular child’s more idiosyncratic tantrum-triggers. If leaving the playground always proves problematic, make an exit plan in advance — like promising a treat in exchange for leaving promptly. And give yourself extra time just in case your child does have a tantrum, so your frustration doesn’t exacerbate it. Just be prepared to follow through on the plan you’ve laid out for your child, by withholding the treat, for example, if things don’t go as you hoped. Otherwise, be prepared for another tantrum next time you’re trying to leave the playground.

Finally, remember to catch them being good, reinforcing positive behavior with praise and encouragement. Young children are hard-wired to seek parental attention of any kind, so try to reserve your most intense reactions for behavior you’d like to see repeated.

Consider tools that may help.

Visible checklists and schedules can help a child transition more smoothly, particularly if they tantrum around routines. Magnetic calendars and dry-erase whiteboards can be used to create simple daily routine charts, and sticker charts can be helpful in tracking chores, potty usage or any other behaviors you want to reinforce.

When To Worry

Though tantrums are normal toddler behavior, extreme meltdowns may indicate a more serious underlying issue. According to Dr. Potegal, parents should consider seeking professional help if a child’s tantrums occur five to 10 times a day, often last longer than 10 minutes, or include

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aggression and destruction. Dr. Lopes added that, by the time your child is in kindergarten, tantrums should happen no more than once a week or so. If you are concerned about your child's tantrums, you can ask your pediatrician to refer you to a specialist, such as a child psychologist.

The most common causes of excessive tantrums are psychological. Sometimes tantrums are a symptom of an inward-directed disorder, such as anxiety or depression, which are easy to miss in young children. Children who have anxiety around a particular setting may express that anxiety through tantrums, explained Dr. Potegal. "The classic example is a school-phobic kid," said Dr. Potegal. "You put her on the bus ... major meltdown."

If your child's excessive tantrums are part of a pattern of outward-directed misbehaviors like acting out or being overly aggressive — including harming others, himself or property — he may be suffering from [attention deficit hyperactivity disorder](#). As the National Institutes of Health notes, A.D.H.D. can appear as early as age 3, when the most common symptom is hyperactivity. If A.D.H.D. is suspected, your child's physician can make a referral for a psychiatric evaluation.

If you are concerned about your child's tantrums, Dr. Lopes suggested consulting the [Association for Behavioral and Cognitive Therapies](#), which has an [extensive fact sheet](#) on pediatric mood disorders and can help you [find a nearby cognitive therapist](#). He also mentioned [parent-child interaction therapy](#), in which a therapist monitors how you interact with your child from another room while communicating with you live via an earpiece. The goal is to help parents gain the strategies they need to handle their child's behavior. You can find more information, including local therapists, at [Parent-Child Interaction Therapy International](#). These approaches, Dr. Lopes said, are the "gold-standard treatments for behavioral issues in children."

Excessive tantrums aren't always symptomatic of a mental health issue, however. The underlying problem could be physical. Dr. Potegal worked with one child whose tantrums coincided with painful reflux. And I've noticed that my own daughter's tantrums increase when she experiences a [prolonged digestive problem](#).