Temper Tantrums

Temper tantrums are normal and common during the toddler years. They typically begin when a child is around 15 months old and can vary in intensity and duration, depending on your child’s temperament. Children tantrum when they are frustrated and overloaded. The push-pull feelings of wanting to grow up but wanting to be a baby can lead to emotional meltdowns. So can being hungry, tired, or sick. The typical toddler also gets frustrated when faced with obstacles to her desires, or just simply falls apart because it all gets to be too much.

While parts of a child’s brain are developing very quickly (such as those that control physical skills), other areas related to self-control and communication remain fairly immature in your child’s brain. While toddlers know what they want and have strong feelings, they often cannot use language well when they are upset and they can’t stop themselves from acting on their goals—like taking another cookie even if the answer was “no.”

Tantrums tell you that your child has lost control and needs help. When a child has a tantrum, negotiating or trying to reason with him will make it last longer—and so will getting angry or threatening punishment. Instead, make sure he is in a safe place (cushioned from hitting head, etc.) and try to ignore the tantrum, while NOT ignoring the child (continue to stay close, calm, and connected). Offering a choice (taking a walk or playing with water) or providing a distraction (looking at the garbage truck out the window) are also strategies for helping a child move on from a tantrum. Remember, though, that tantrums are very common for this age.

What you can do to prevent and guide tantrums

1. **Separate yourself from your child’s behavior.** This can be tough in a culture that blames parents for “doing it wrong” if a child is off-track or having a tantrum. Try to remind yourself that a tantrum means that your child is overwhelmed. Your child is doing the best he can in the moment. Your job is to support, guide, and stay calm. Let the bystanders think what they want.

2. **Decide if the behavior really matters.** It’s good to know how and when to avoid power struggles. Get clear on what is important, and where you can be flexible. For example, can you live with an outfit that doesn’t match, if your child wants to choose her own shirt? Sometimes “giving in” gracefully and with authority can be a helpful strategy.
For example, “I changed my mind, you can wear that shirt—it looks great.”

- **Stay calm yourself.** When a child is having a hard time, they need you to be their rock. If you have a big reaction (frowning, shouting, getting upset), your child is likely to get even more riled up, making it harder for him to calm down.

- **Offer advance notice about when an activity is about to end.** Say, “When this book is finished, we’re going home,” or, “When the timer dings, it’s time for your bath.” This heads-up will work sometimes, but don’t be surprised the times it doesn’t.

- **Prevention is key.** Anticipate when your child may get overloaded before it happens and help your child by changing your behavior. Is your child too tired or hungry to go to the store with you? Are transitions hard for your child? Is that forbidden object still within your child’s sight and reach? Make changes to your expectations and schedule when you can.

- **Give some choices.** Ask, “Do you want the blue or red cup?” or, “Can I give you a hug?” (Don’t take the answer “no” personally: he may just not want to be touched right then.) Avoid asking questions if no choice is actually being offered, for example: “Do you want to get in the bath?”

- **Set your limit with as little emotion (and as few words) as possible.** The more matter-of-fact you can be, the better. Talk in a low, steady voice and be aware of the nonverbal messages you’re sending with your facial expression and body language. Using a kind and compassionate tone can be calming to your child. It is also a way to soothe yourself during a stressful time.

- **Validate your child’s feelings or experience:** Say, for instance, “You really wanted another cookie. Cookies are so tasty, and you are upset that one is the limit.” If you skip this step, your child is likely to dial up her reaction to show you just how much she wants another cookie. Often skipping this step only fuels the tantrum.

- **Honor your child’s feelings while holding the limit.** Your child’s feelings themselves are not right or wrong, nor are they the problem. It is how feelings get expressed that can be problematic, such as hitting when angry. You can make space for feelings ("I see that you are upset."). While putting limits on behavior ("I will stop you from hitting."). This can be done calmly, and without passing judgment or shaming the child.

- **Be ready with a hug.** Your child needs to be reassured of your love after a tantrum. Words and gestures of affection are important.

## 2. But what's the best way to get children to calm down?

You’re not alone in asking this question! One tricky factor is that we are only in charge of ourselves, and as much as we’d like to, we can’t really “calm down” our children at all. What we can do is give them strategies and experiences that help them learn how to feel calm again. You might:

- **Ask if he wants a hug**
- **Give them a safe place to be upset (like creating a Cozy Corner where children can feel safe and calm down)**
- **Offer an acceptable way to ‘get the mad out’, such as by ripping paper, stomping feet, pushing the wall, or punching a pillow**
- **Offer a soothing activity like sand or water play, or kneading play-dough**
- **Ask your child to join you in a favorite activity**
- **Play or sing a favorite song or share a story**
- **Go for a walk together**
- **Give the child some space (while continuing to supervise)**
- **Or something else that works for your particular child!**

With lots of modeling and coaching—and lots of love and patience from you—children learn to soothe and regulate themselves over time.

While tantrums are never fun, try to see them as opportunities for your child to learn about rules and limits, about feelings, and about self-regulation—all critical skills for life.