

Tantrums



Tantrums happen when children are overwhelmed by strong feelings and lose control of their behaviour. They mostly happen in toddlers and are a normal part of their development.

When a tantrum happens, it is important to stay with your child and help them calm down. Your child will gradually learn to manage their own feelings and learn the behaviour that is expected.

What is a tantrum?

A tantrum is when a child loses control of their feelings and behaviour. They are not able to calm themselves or think about what is happening. It is very scary for a child and it can be scary for parents too.

Tantrums are a chance for your child to learn about big feelings. When you respond to a child's feelings and to the cause of the upset, it helps them gradually learn the skills to manage their own feelings and behaviour.

Not all strong feelings are tantrums. Children can be defiant or angry at times, but it doesn't mean they are losing control and having a tantrum.

What causes tantrums?

Some people use the term 'temper tantrum' but the anger and frustration of a tantrum is always mixed with other feelings. Your toddler may be:

- scared
- jealous of a sibling
- disappointed at not getting what they want.

There might be too much going on around them, or they could be hungry, unwell or tired.

When the tantrum happens – 'time in'

When your child is out of control they need you to stay with them and help them to manage their feelings. This is called 'time in'. Staying with your child helps them:

- feel secure
- learn that big feelings can be managed
- build trust. They learn that no matter how bad things are, you will not abandon them.

When a toddler has a tantrum they need to let all those big feelings out in a safe way.

Your child needs you to stay calm and kind and take charge until they have calmed down.

- Let them know you understand how they feel. You might say 'I can see you are upset because you really want that toy'.
- Be kind with your words and touch. If they won't let you hold them, stay close so they feel secure and can connect with you again when they're ready.
- If they are hurting themselves or hitting, kicking or biting others, you could say 'It's OK to be upset but I won't let you hurt yourself/hit/kick/bite'.
- Reassure your child this upset will pass and they will soon feel calm again. Help them notice when this has happened.
- If your own feelings are getting out of control, tell your child you are going to another room for a while so you can feel better. Say you will be back soon to look after them. Make sure they are safe and get someone else to stay with them if you can. Come back when you said you would.

A tantrum is a sign your child is overwhelmed by their feelings. They are not being 'naughty' or trying to control you. It is a call for your help.

What doesn't help

It is not helpful to:

- try to reason with your child. They can't 'hear' you when their feelings are so big
- punish a child having a tantrum. They are not being 'naughty' – they are not able to control themselves when overwhelmed
- ignore a tantrum. This can frighten your child because they don't know what to do without your help
- threaten to walk off and leave them, or laugh at them. This can make them even more upset. Children need you to be with them and take charge in a kind way.

Seeing tantrums as learning opportunities makes them easier to deal with.

After the tantrum

Children need to feel understood before they can move on and learn from the experience. When you and your child are calm, remind them that you love them before you help them learn from what happened.

Dealing with feelings

Have lots of conversations about feelings and help children know that all feelings are OK. Often a child might seem angry or frustrated but underneath they can be feeling scared, jealous or disappointed. It is important to help them name the underlying feeling so they know what all their different feelings are.

For example, if your child is upset you might say:

- 'You seem very angry. Can you tell me what's wrong?'
- 'You really wanted that toy. You must be disappointed.'
- 'I think you must be sad inside'. Tell me if you need a hug'.

If your child is sad, they might want you to hold them until they finish crying.

It is important to not ignore a child's big feelings. The feelings don't just go away. They get pushed down and may show up in other ways that can be hard to deal with later. Your child may become withdrawn, whiney, anxious or rebellious. They may also develop certain habits like nail biting, jigglng legs or hair twirling to try and contain their pent-up feelings. They might learn to be afraid of emotions and find it harder to know their true feelings as they get older. Understanding emotions helps people get along with others and develop relationships.

Responding to the cause

Try to work out the cause of the upset and respond to it. This does not mean giving in to what your child wants. It means helping them learn to solve problems and to deal with change, disappointment and frustration.

It helps to view what's happening through your child's eyes to really understand. For example, you might think they don't want the food you have given if they throw it on the floor in anger. If you look more closely, it might be they are upset because you have given them a different bowl or spoon. You might have put a new food in the bowl and they are scared because they don't know what it is.

Preventing tantrums

No matter what you do, some tantrums are bound to happen. There are things you can do to help keep them to a minimum.

Learn the triggers

In the build-up to a tantrum, your child will show they are becoming overloaded with emotion. They might be clingy, whiney, 'out-of-sorts', very demanding or persistent. They might be acting silly or seem overly active.

It may help to keep a diary and note what is going on when tantrums happen, eg time of day, what you are doing, what your child is doing.

If there is a pattern, try to work out what you can do to prevent the tantrum. For example, if it always happens around dinner time, try giving them dinner earlier, bathing them before dinner, letting them help you prepare the meal, or having some special time with them at this time of day.



Try to work out what is bothering them. It may be something that seems very small to you but can be huge for a child. If it comes on top of other stresses or frustration it can tip them 'over the edge'.

Is your child:

- needing more closeness and connection with you?
- tired, hungry or unwell?
- frustrated at not being able to have or do something?
- affected by other stresses – starting childcare, a new baby, parents feeling stressed or fighting?
- feeling discouraged by only hearing 'No', 'Stop that' or 'Don't'?

Spending regular one-on-one time with your child can help reduce tantrums.

It can help to:

- spend one-on-one time with your child each day and give them your full attention. Special time together can help meet children's deep need for closeness and connection with people they love, and help them manage their feelings. Put your chores and phone aside. If your child feels you are too busy for them they will try to get your attention in other ways
- give them lots of room to move and explore. Play with them and follow their lead – this is a good way to learn how they see the world
- notice and tell them all the good things you like about them and what they do
- say what you want in positive ways, eg you might say 'Let's see how quickly you can put your toys in the box' instead of 'Put your toys away'.

Think about stress in your child's life and try to find ways to reduce it.

Plan ahead

Planning ahead will help keep tantrums from happening too often. Take into account your child's needs as well as your own. You might want to:

- go on outings after sleeps and meals and not when your child is hungry or tired
- pack a comforter, favourite toy or book you can give them if they become upset
- put things out of sight if they can't have them.

Try to have predictable routines. They help children to feel secure and in control. Sometimes a change in routine can trigger a tantrum.

Be flexible

It is important to be flexible if your child is finding it hard to cope.

- If you can see it's going to be 'one of those days', leave what you had planned and do something relaxing with your child. A small amount of time at the start of the day can save a lot of time and stress at the end of the day.
- If it has felt like a tough day, make time to relax with your child. Settle down and connect.

You could:

- walk in the park or around the block
- sit and watch their favourite TV program together
- sing or dance
- tell stories or read a book.

Help children feel in control

Toddlers are learning to do things for themselves as they become more independent. They like to feel involved and capable and will often want to do things without your help. Letting them feel in control as they practise skills can avoid a power struggle and a tantrum.

It can help to:

- stay calm and be patient when they want to do things their way. It might take a bit longer but it could be quicker than trying to calm an upset child. It will also help them learn and develop their independence
- tell them you know how they feel if they start to get upset. It is important to acknowledge feelings and not dismiss them





- let them know when a change is coming. If you are at the playground and it's nearly time to leave, you might say 'We need to leave soon. What do you want to play on for this last five minutes?'
- let your toddler feel in charge even when there isn't a choice. If you want to turn off the TV you might say 'We need to turn the TV off when this program is finished. Do you want to turn it off yourself, or would you like me to do it?' You still get to decide, but letting them choose how it happens means you both win.

The more your toddler feels in control and able to do things, the calmer they will be.

Tantrums at the shops

Many tantrums happen at the shops which can be very stressful. Parents often feel embarrassed and worry about what others think.

If you take them shopping:

- try to be quick – take a list of what you need if this will help
- make sure children are not tired and have been to the toilet
- bring a snack for them to eat
- don't chat too long with other adults – children can easily become bored and restless
- let them help by getting things off the lower shelves for you
- have a treat afterwards such as a drink or spending some time in the park.

If your child is building to a tantrum you need to be strong enough to leave the shopping basket and take them out to the car or somewhere quiet until they calm down. When they are calm, praise them for managing their big feelings so well, and say they should feel proud of themselves.

Older children

Most children grow out of tantrums by the time they go to school. If children of school age are still having tantrums it is likely that something is going wrong for them. It could be:

- stress, eg not coping with schoolwork or friends
- family problems, eg parents fighting or family break-up
- a health problem.

If you can see their feelings building up encourage them to take some quiet time until they feel calm. You could stay with them, or not, whichever they find most helpful. When you are both calm, talk about what gets them upset and look at ways they might deal with this.

If your child has a lot of tantrums and you can't find the cause, you might want to talk with a health professional.

Dealing with tantrums can be very stressful. Look after yourself and draw on people or services that can support you, so you can stay calm, wise and kind when tantrums happen.

Want more information?

Parent Helpline

Phone 1300 364 100

For advice on child health and parenting

Child and Family Health Service (CaFHS)

Phone 1300 733 606, 9am-4.30pm, Mon-Fri for an appointment. The child health nurses can talk with you about your child's behaviour and development www.cafhs.sa.gov.au

Raising Children Network

For information on raising children www.raisingchildren.net.au

Parenting SA

For more Parent Easy Guides including 'Living with toddlers', 'Time in: guiding children's behaviour', 'Positive approaches to guiding behaviour: 2-12 years', 'Sleep: 0-6 years', 'Toilet training', 'Feeding toddlers' and 'Sleep disturbance' www.parenting.sa.gov.au



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Parenting SA

A partnership between the Department of Human Services and the Women's and Children's Health Network.

Ph: 08 8303 1660

www.parenting.sa.gov.au

Parent Easy Guides are free in South Australia.

Important: This information is not intended to replace advice from a qualified practitioner.

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