



Dealing with Tantrums

Tantrums are a real problem, and they are common. When a child starts to yell and scream, what is a parent to do?

Children usually have tantrums because they are tired, frustrated, and don't know how to express their feelings. The good news is that tantrums peak at about two years of age and generally disappear by three years of age. As a child learns to talk and to regulate her own feelings, she is less likely to resort to tantrums.

There is a lot that can be done to prevent tantrums. Don't take your daughter shopping when she missed her nap. Don't drag your son along on errands when he is hungry or bored. If we notice when our children are tired and frustrated, we can prevent many tantrums by not adding extra stress at a time of tiredness, hunger, or frustration. When you do take children along on errands, take things for her to do while she waits for you. If you see a tantrum looming, set aside what you are doing to calm your child. Talk gently. Hug or stroke him. Breathe deeply. Provide something for the child to do.

Respond calmly to tantrums. A berserk child does not need a berserk parent. Stay calm. Remove the child from any danger. Sometimes it soothes a child if you calmly stand nearby. When the child gets more settled, a parent might try to give words to the child's frustration: "You really wanted to go out and play, didn't you?" "You are feeling very tired." Recognize that tantrums are a normal way for children to express frustration.

Give children control when possible. Children like to have some control in their own lives. Offer them choices. "Would you like milk or orange juice for breakfast?" "Would you like to play with cars or blocks?" "Would you like me to read you a story or sing you a song when I tuck you in?" Children whose preferences are regularly respected, are less likely to get frustrated.

Don't let tantrums set the rules. If a parent responds to tantrums by frantically working to appease the child, that child may become a terrorist. Some children, especially after three years of age, throw tantrums because they have learned over time that it is the best way (or the only way) to get their way. We can understand their desire for something without feeling that we must indulge their whim. We can hold to limits while acknowledging their desire: "You really wish we could buy that toy for you."

Make sure that you are involved in your child's life in many positive ways. Notice the good things she does. Plan activities with him. Have fun together. A child's frustration is often worsened when there is not a parent available to help the child work through the frustrations of growing up. After a tantrum, do not punish or lecture. Provide the safe and loving environment that helps children grow.

If tantrums continue after the third birthday or become frequent or damaging, talk to your pediatrician.

Applications:

What are the signs you see that one of your children is about to have a tantrum? Are there certain situations or pressures that seem to make them more likely?

What have you found that helps your child calm down instead of escalating to a tantrum? What have you found that helps your child get involved in something else?

What have you done that helps you stay calm when your child has a tantrum? Have you found anything that helps your child settle down after she or he starts a tantrum?

When your child is calm (at least an hour after a tantrum) you may be able to teach a child how to let you know what she is feeling or what he needs. What would work to help your child express him or herself without a tantrum?