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 PARENTING RESOURCE

Toddler Tantrums 101: Why They Happen and What You Can Do

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Although tantrums can surely be unpleasant, 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.



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We've all been there: the 18-month-old who screams at the top of his lungs (in public) when he doesn't get his way. The 2-year-old who melts down unless she gets the blue bowl and ONLY the blue bowl. Or perhaps the 3-year-old who flat-out refuses to leave the park. How in the world are you supposed to handle these heated

situations when you're dealing with a little, persistent person who is driven by emotions and impulses, not logic?

The Impact of Growth and Development

During babyhood, most parents enjoy a sense of control over their child's day-to-day life. The toddler years are a challenging time because between 1 and 3 years old your child grows and changes so rapidly. Children this age are very clear on their likes and dislikes, and what they do and don't want to do, and they are dead-set on communicating this in any way they can to exert control over their world. While totally exasperating, tantrums and pushing the limits signal a leap in your child's development.

Also, children are just developing their ability to use spoken language to communicate their thoughts and feelings. Your little one may not always have the communication skills to tell you how she feels with words. This can naturally cause a lot of frustration and quickly result in a tantrum.

Finally, it is critical to keep in mind that a toddler's brain lacks the ability to "put on the brakes"—to stop herself from doing something she shouldn't, like hitting a friend or touching your phone. Even when young children have the ability to repeat a rule to you, until they're about 3½ to 4, they don't have the impulse control to act on it.

What You Can Do to Prevent and Respond to Tantrums



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Prevention

Tantrums from small children can have surprising emotional impact—knocking grown-ups off balance in the moment.

Taking a preventive approach can benefit everyone. Here are some actions you can take ahead of a major meltdown:

- **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 having a tantrum. Remind yourself that your child isn't purposefully trying to humiliate you—he is just having a hard time coping. Your job is to support, guide, and stay calm. Let the bystanders think what they want.
- **Decide if setting a limit is necessary, also known as choosing your battles.** Get clear on what limits are 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? The idea is to think about your child's interests and build in ways to meet those needs.

- **Offer advance notice about when an activity is about to end.** “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 when it doesn’t.
- **Give age-appropriate choices.** Ask, “Do you want the blue or red cup?” or, “Do you want to brush your teeth before or after books?” Avoid asking questions if no choice is actually being offered, for example: “Your job is to put all the blocks back in the box”, versus “Can you clean up your toys?”
- **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. (And, it’s also a way to soothe yourself during a stressful time.)

Intervention and Support

Lots of parents ask, “How can I get my child to calm down?” This is tricky because you can’t actually make children calm down. What you *can* do is respond in ways that maximize the chance that they will pull themselves together more quickly. Here are some things you can try:

- **Keep yourself calm and present in the face of the tantrum.** When a child is having a hard time, she needs you to be her 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 her to calm down.
- **Validate your child’s feelings and perspective:** Say, for instance, “You really wanted another cookie. Cookies are so tasty, and you are upset that you can have only one.” If you skip this step, your child is likely to dial up his reaction to show you just how much he wants another cookie. Skipping this step and going straight to reassurance (“You’ll be fine—you’ll have another cookie after dinner”) may just fuel the tantrum.
- **Honor your child’s feelings while holding the limit.** Your child’s feelings are not right or wrong. It is how feelings get expressed that can be problematic, such as hitting when angry. Give her some space while continuing to supervise: “You are so upset your whole mind and body are out of control. I will be here by your side and wait for you to calm.” You can also 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.
- **Offer connection, physical comfort, or an alternate activity.** You can ask if he wants a hug or offer a soothing activity like sand or water play. You could share a favorite song or book, or go for a walk together.
- **Model and share how to take a break.** Take a parent “time-out” if you need it (ensuring your child is in a safe place). Create a safe “Cozy Corner” where children can feel relaxed and go to calm down.
- **Offer an acceptable way to “get the mad out.”** Some toddlers love learning new words to describe their feelings, such as *furious*, *irate*, and *livid*. You can also offer an activity like ripping paper, stomping feet, or punching a pillow/ball of clay—activities that you see as acceptable ways to express anger.

With lots of modeling and coaching, children learn to soothe and regulate themselves over time. Although tantrums can surely be unpleasant, 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.

Tweetable Takeway

Tantrums happen when toddlers are overwhelmed, beyond their ability to cope. Parents can provide the words and actions that show they understand. #ParentForward

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About Baby Steps

This article was featured in *Baby Steps*, a ZERO TO THREE newsletter for parents and caregivers. Each issue offers science-based information on a topic of interest to parents and caregivers of young children—from sleep to challenging behaviors, and everything in between.

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3 Steps for understanding and responding to challenging behaviors

This tool offers a three-step approach for helping you figure out what children might communicate through their behaviors. Included are also suggestions for how to best respond by using the Observe, Learn, Respond 3-step process.

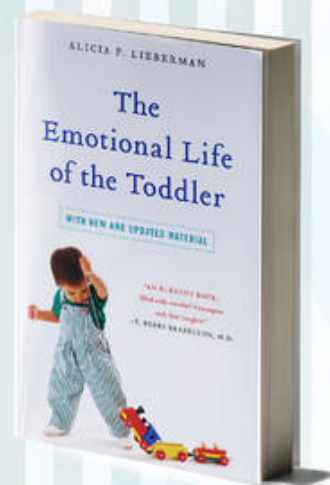
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