

Coping with childhood tantrums

Why does my child throw tantrums?

Children typically throw tantrums because they feel overwhelmed by (usually negative) emotions and simply don't know how to express their feelings in words.

Children DO NOT typically throw tantrums to deliberately annoy their parents, however if handled incorrectly, they may learn to see tantrums as a guaranteed way of getting attention, and stage them specifically for that purpose. To many children, attention is still attention, irrespective of whether it is positive or negative.

Dealt with incorrectly, tantrums can also become your child's weapon of choice in manipulating you to get whatever they want, whenever they want it. They may even learn to stage tantrums in front of other people to embarrass you into doing what they want you to do.

What can I do to avoid tantrums?

Tantrums are sometimes unavoidable and inexplicable, even when you're doing everything right. Tantrums may be minimized in many instances by:

- maintaining a calm environment where possible – avoid arguments with other adults in their presence at least until they are old enough to understand the conflict process without becoming overwhelmed or stressed
- maintaining consistent boundaries for the child – constantly changing rules, responses and reactions confuse a child and increase their anxiety and stress
- avoiding direct confrontation over matters which are known to trigger tantrums – you do not need to win every battle in order to win the war
- being a good role model by keeping your own negative emotions under control, especially in the presence of your child – children tend to imitate the behaviour of those they respect and love the most
- giving your child regular positive attention when they are behaving

How should I deal with my child when they throw a tantrum?

Firstly, if you feel you are going to lose your cool, walk away and cool down before you do anything. If needs be, you could ask your partner to deal with the tantrum in your place as this will reassure the child that his/her parents are a team.

Otherwise, it depends what has triggered the tantrum...

1. If the tantrum is **in response to an instruction** that your child does not want to follow:
 - DO NOT back down under any circumstance as it will teach your child to use tantrums in order to manipulate you – thus making their tantrums longer, louder and more intense when you try to resist them later on
 - remain calm and repeat your instruction in as positive and reassuring a manner as you can
 - if the tantrum does not immediately subside:

- ignore the child – this teaches them that they cannot get your attention through tantrums
 - if it is safe to do so, you may need to walk away from the child and allow them space and time to cool down
 - then when they are calm again, repeat the instruction in a calm and positive manner
 - repeat as often as needed, but do not change your instruction as it teaches your child that you can be manipulated by them using tantrums to get out of doing what you want
2. If the tantrum is **in response to a reprimand** for doing something naughty:
- remain calm and avoid raising your voice or losing your own temper
 - DO NOT retract your reprimand or apologise for upsetting your child – they are not disagreeing with your reprimand, they simply are having trouble dealing with the way it makes them feel
 - if it is safe to do so, walk away from the child and allow them space and time to cool down
 - then when they are calm again, reassure them that you love them and are proud of them, but that what they did is not acceptable and encourage them to be good
3. If the tantrum **arises out of frustration** with something your child is trying unsuccessfully to do:
- calmly ask them what the matter is and if they would like you to help them
 - DO NOT interfere or help them without their permission as it may anger them even more – they need to learn that they have the power to succeed through trying again
 - if they refuse your help, encourage the child to try it again and reassure him/her that they CAN do it
 - failing this, ignore the child altogether until they calm down, then reassure them that you believe in their ability to do anything they want, and that they should keep trying

What should I NOT DO when my child throws a tantrum?

The most important thing to remember is that YOU are the adult. The child needs you to be its comforter, counsellor, guide and mentor, not its competitor.

- DO NOT respond by throwing a tantrum yourself
- DO NOT lose your temper with the child
- NEVER call your child names or tell them they are stupid, bad or naughty – their behaviour may temporarily not be acceptable, but they are still the same child you love
- resist the temptation to argue or confront your child when it is clear they are throwing a tantrum – remember they often throw tantrums because they are overwhelmed and possibly scared
- NEVER threaten your child with punishment for throwing a tantrum as it may incite them even more – remember they are most likely out of control, not deliberately being naughty
- NEVER lie to your child just to get them to quieten down (ie: tell them that a monster will come and take them away if they don't quieten down) – they will stop trusting you and it could take years to regain their trust
- DO NOT attempt to bribe them with rewards into calming down– this will only encourage them to throw tantrums more often just to get those rewards
- If you are not the person at whom the child is directing the tantrum, DO NOT interfere unless invited to by that parent – the child will quickly learn to exploit any disagreement between parents and may deliberately stage a tantrum to create a spectacle that amuses them or distracts the parents away from something the child wants to do

- DO NOT gang up against the child by dragging other adults into support you – if you want another adult to take over, step aside and remove yourself from the vicinity to allow that adult to handle the situation their way

Setting and maintaining boundaries

Children are not born with an inherent sense of appropriateness. They learn from the role models they are exposed to, whether that be their parents, older siblings, teachers or even TV and movies. Children tend to mimic the coping behaviours they observe in their role models, so consider what they might be learning from the way you behave around them.

Children also have an innate need for security and a sense of safety. They constantly test their boundaries and keep pushing where they find weaknesses until they discover where the new boundary is. If you do not intend to follow through, DO NOT set the boundary. Children are very quick to notice inconsistency, and will exploit it to their own advantage any way they can, especially if they have a strong temperament. Once you have notified your child of the consequence for breaking a rule, failing to carry it out is sure to have undesirable results such as:

1. the child may lose confidence in you because you don't keep your word
2. when you finally DO follow through, your child will resist you with much more resolve because they don't believe you mean it, thus making it infinitely harder to enforce the boundary
3. your child will do the same as you – tell others what they want to hear without intending to follow through
4. believe that they can manipulate you to get their own way

Ironically perhaps to some, a child who has not been allowed to push past a boundary despite tantrums and manipulation, tends to bond closer with the parent who refused to give in. It is important however to have a sound reason for every boundary and be prepared to defend the boundary with that reason when the child is old enough to understand it. Otherwise, as soon as the child is old enough to realise that the boundary is nothing more than parental control without a fair reason, you are likely to lose their respect and find them deliberately breaking it to prove their independence.

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