

Temper Tantrums

Temper tantrums are a common problem in toddlers, and one that can be difficult for parents to handle. It is important to remain calm and keep your own anger under control when handling your child's temper tantrums. Children usually outgrow temper tantrums after age 3.

What are temper tantrums?

Temper tantrums are common in toddlers, especially between 18 months and 3 years. Tantrums may be triggered by a number of things, most often anger or frustration at not getting something your child wants. They may also be influenced by overtiredness, hunger, or attention seeking.

Temper tantrums can be very challenging for parents to handle. If you give in to your child's demands or if you get angry yourself, your child will learn that throwing tantrums gets a response. Responding calmly and with control is the best way to handle tantrums. You'll be glad to hear that problems with temper tantrums eventually go away!

What do they look like?

- A tantrum includes any kind of inappropriate behavior that your child uses to express anger or frustration. When upset, your child may cry, scream, or hold his or her breath. The behavior may seem way out of proportion to your child's disappointment.
- During the toddler years (the "terrible twos"), tantrums can become a frequent problem. Sometimes it may seem as if your child has a tantrum anytime he doesn't get what he wants.
- Tantrums have a definite effect on parents. You may feel angry, embarrassed, and overwhelmed by your child's behavior. Understanding why young children have tantrums and forming a rational plan for dealing with them can reduce a lot of the negative impact of tantrums.

What causes temper tantrums?

As toddlers grow, they want to be more independent, but they're too young to really make many decisions for themselves. They're also not intellectually mature enough to understand the reasons for things, or why they have to wait for some things. They lack the language skills to express their frustration in words. It's also hard for them to control powerful emotions, especially if they are feeling tired or hungry.

All of these factors contribute to temper tantrums as a way for young children to express frustration and anger. Handling tantrums in a "calm, cool, and collected" way helps to prevent them from turning into a regular habit.

What are some possible complications of temper tantrums?

- The main risk of tantrums is that your child will somehow be hurt while he or she is out of control. You may need to take steps to ensure your child's safety until the tantrum has passed.
- Sometimes children hold their breath so long that they faint. Although these "breath-holding spells" are scary, they don't really cause any harm.
- If these severe types of tantrums become a frequent occurrence—or if they are accompanied by other problems like head banging or very aggressive behavior—you should discuss the problem with your doctor.

What puts your child at risk of temper tantrums?

Children with certain medical conditions, disabilities, or developmental problems may be more likely to have tantrums.

Toddlers may be more likely to have temper tantrums in certain situations:

- When feeling tired, hungry, or sick.
- At times of stress or changes at home; for example, when a new baby comes home.
- When usual routines are disrupted.

Can temper tantrums be prevented?

There are things you can do to help keep temper tantrums to a minimum:

- Establish routines and stick to them as much as possible. Tantrums may be less likely if your child knows what to expect during the day.
- Be firm but flexible. Make clear to your child what kind of behavior you expect from him or her, but try not to be too strict.
- Allow your child to make choices when possible. This helps children feel like they have some control over their day.
- Avoid overstimulation and frustration if possible. Know when your child is starting to have enough excitement for one day. Provide him or her with age-appropriate activities; toddlers sometimes get frustrated when they can't do things older kids are doing.
- Make sure your child gets enough sleep and don't let him or her get too hungry.

What's the best way to handle tantrums?

- Handling tantrums in a “calm, cool, and collected” way is the best way to shorten and reduce the number of tantrums.
- Turn away for a minute or two. This gives your child time to recover, while allowing him or her to see that the tantrum isn't getting the desired response.
- Try not to get angry. Don't hit or spank your child. If you react with anger, your child will get the message that out-of-control emotions are an acceptable way to respond to frustrating situations. If you're having trouble staying calm, leave the room for a few minutes. *The most important thing is to show your child the ways of controlling anger that you want him or her to use.*
- Don't give your child what he or she wants to make the tantrum stop. If you do, your child will get the message that tantrums work!
- If tantrums are relatively minor, you can often just ignore them. You may be able to distract your child with a toy or by making funny faces. Saying positive things and giving your child a chance to calm down may be helpful. If that doesn't work, then turn away until the tantrum has passed.
- If your toddler is holding his or her breath, you can usually just ignore it. Even if he or she passes out, there is rarely any harm done. But be sure to mention this behavior to your doctor.
- For more severe tantrums, you may need to take steps to ensure that your child doesn't hurt himself or others or doesn't destroy property. If the tantrum is happening in a public place, take your child somewhere more private

(for example, to a car or restroom) until he or she calms down. If it seems like there is a danger of physical harm, you may have to hold or restrain your child until he or she calms down.

- After the tantrum has passed, don't punish your child. However, when your child is calm, you should explain that his or her frustrations are understandable, but that tantrums and other kinds of out-of-control behavior are not acceptable. If hunger or sleepiness seems to have contributed to your child's tantrum, give him or her a snack or a nap.
- Fortunately, temper tantrums usually become less frequent after age 3. The tantrums should stop by age 4. By this time, your child will have more control over his or her day and more ability to communicate his or her feelings.

When should I call your office?

Call our office if:

- Your child is still having temper tantrums at age 4 or older. A more in-depth discussion of parenting may be needed.
- Your child is having severe temper tantrums that pose a risk of harm to himself or herself or others, or if he or she is having destructive tantrums.
- Your child is holding her breath during tantrums, particularly if she passes out.
- Your child's tantrums are accompanied by head banging, physical symptoms such as headaches, or other changes in behavior.