

Tantrums, Mood Meltdowns

What Is Considered Typical?

We all have days when we just don't feel like ourselves—things that normally wouldn't bother us are “the last straw.” Children are no different. Adults are usually able to manage the ups and downs, but young children (by about 2 years of age) are just beginning to manage their ups and downs and control their emotions. It may seem like progress in this area is slow, but given time and continued support and encouragement, children do learn.

Temper tantrums are really just immature ways of expressing intensely felt emotions. Because children express their emotions through their behavior, parents usually respond to their child's behavior but may miss the feelings that are causing the behavior. Rather than responding to tantrums with a disciplinary approach, it may be more helpful to see tantrums as opportunities to help children learn to express their feelings appropriately.

What Strategies Help Prevent Tantrums?

Parents can sometimes avoid meltdowns by paying close attention to the cues their children give (see “Tantrum Triggers”). Some tantrums occur because of a child's inability to handle certain social situations. To prevent this type of tantrum, teach your child how to share and take turns and to say “no,” or “mine,” instead of screaming, hitting, or biting.

Some tantrums happen as a response to frustration. To avoid this type of tantrum, help your child understand what triggers their tantrums, then teach coping strategies. For example, help your child to recognize when they are becoming frustrated and teach them to ask for help. Keep your child's energy focused on solving problems before they become crises.

What Strategies Help Moderate a Tantrum in Progress?

Having a breakdown or losing control can be very unsettling for a child, so it is important to remain calm and to let your child know that you will help them calm down. When responding to a tantrum, remember that what works for one child may aggravate another child. For example, some children may be extra sensitive to touch and may not respond well to hugging or rocking. The key is to be attentive to your child's needs.

There are times when the best response to a tantrum is to let it continue. When this occurs, be sure your child is safe and knows that you are available when they are ready to calm down. If the tantrum seems to be continuing too long or if the child is becoming harmful, intervention may be necessary.

Are There Times to Be Concerned about Tantrums?

If you do become concerned about your child's behavior, talking with others who care for your child (such as a preschool teacher) can often be very beneficial—strategies that work well in other settings can sometimes work well at home too. If your child's behavior becomes too disruptive, you may need to seek outside support and guidance from your child's doctor.

Responding effectively to tantrums when a child is young can reduce the number of tantrums later.

Helpful Tips

- Sing a soothing song or try hugging or rocking.
- Do running in place or other physical activity to get rid of aggression.
- Offer something with a soothing texture like a fuzzy animal.
- Take deep breaths and ask your child to also.
- Re-direct—when frustration rises, play a game, read a book, or dance.
- Laughter—make a joke or do something silly.

Tantrum Triggers

- Transitions: Give plenty of notice before changing activities.
- Frustration: Young children are learning to share so have multiple toys for this age group.
- Routine: Toddlers do best when they know the limits and what's expected of them.
- Hunger: Some children have trouble managing their emotions right before mealtime. Keep healthful snacks on hand for when meals are delayed.
- Fatigue: Tired children sometimes have short fuses. They may need a nap or quiet time.

