

Let's Talk about Temper Tantrums¹

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Overview

As toddlers approach their second birthday, parents may find that their perfect little angels can quickly become angry and have a temper tantrum. Tantrums are a normal part of growing up—and they can be very frustrating for parents to handle. Knowing what might cause a tantrum as well as the best way to deal with one once it occurs will help you be in control of the situation. Here are some tips for avoiding tantrums. While these tips will help you to reduce the number of tantrums your child has, remember that tantrums don't make either you or your child bad. Tantrums are normal: they are a means by which young children express their emotions. Your role as a parent is to guide your child in expressing his* emotions in more appropriate ways.

Causes of Tantrums

Many parents are shocked by how quickly a perfectly happy child can become angry. Parents need to examine what happened to cause this sudden change in behavior. A child may have a temper tantrum for several reasons:

- **Hunger.** A hungry child is much less likely to be pleasant.
- **Overly Tired.** A child who has missed a nap--or did not get enough sleep the night before--is more easily frustrated.
- **Helplessness.** A child unable to complete a task (buttoning a shirt, putting building blocks on top of each) can have feelings of failure and disappointment.
- **Sudden Changes.** A child abruptly switched from one activity to another is more likely to become upset and act out.
- **Attention Getting.** A child who only receives hugs and affection when upset can form the habit of having tantrums.

In short, children whose emotional and physical needs are met are much less likely to act out.

What to Do When a Tantrum Occurs

No matter how well you meet your child's physical and emotional needs, he will still have

1. This document is FCS2153, one of a series of the Department of Family, Youth, and Community Sciences, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. First publication: January 2000. Reviewed by Heidi Radunovich, Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences, December 2006. With appreciation to Anne Fugate, project coordinator, University of Florida, for Florida's CYFAR State Strengthening Grant. Please visit the EDIS Web site at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>.

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tantrums. Avoid feeling angry or guilty if a tantrum happens. Your child doesn't act out to make you angry. His behavior is probably scaring him, too. At this age, children use tantrums as a means of expression. Your child doesn't know how to express what he is feeling. By demonstrating patience and love, you can help him learn to express his feelings with words and act out his anger in more appropriate ways. Here are some general rules to follow to control the tantrum:

- **Stay calm.** It may be hard to learn to do, but as the parent you must stay calm and in control. Be sure to speak calmly. Your acting upset only confuses and frustrates your child.
- **Don't change your "no" to a "yes."** Don't change a rule you have made just to get the child to stop his tantrum behavior. Saying yes may provide short-term relief, but the power the child gains from your giving in will make it more difficult to enforce the rule later. Children benefit from having parents who enforce the rules. Children need to know who is in charge. Being warm, firm, and consistent are fundamental in raising a child.
- **Remove your child.** If your child has a tantrum in a public place, remove him. These outbursts can be irritating and embarrassing--you'll achieve nothing by trying to stick it out. You may have to sit outside in the car until your child settles down or go home and come back alone (if that's possible), at a later time.
- **Remove yourself.** If your child is in a safe place (such as his bedroom), leave the scene for a few minutes and allow him to calm down. Without an audience to perform for, he is more likely to stop.
- **Restrain him.** If your child begins to hurt himself during a tantrum (hitting his head on the floor, for example) you should intervene as calmly as possible. Restrain him--and while holding him, say, "You are very angry right now. I won't let you hurt yourself or me. I'm here and I love you."
- **Talk afterwards.** Don't try to talk to your child about his behavior while he is still upset. Wait until after the tantrum is over and then discuss

with your child how he can better deal with his anger and frustration rather than kicking, biting, and/or screaming.

Recognizing Feelings

Young children do not have experience in expressing what they feel. Parents can help by recognizing and responding to what their child is feeling. Imagine a situation in which a child has a temper tantrum after being told he cannot have a cookie before dinner. A positive parental response could be, "Son, I know you're upset because you can't have a cookie. The rule is no cookies just before dinner. You can have a cookie after dinner." These comments acknowledge the child's feelings while still enforcing the rule. Never forget: a temper tantrum is an inappropriate method a child uses to cope with frustration. How parents respond to a child's tantrums helps determine how frequently tantrums happen. After the tantrum is over, praise your child for regaining control. Also hug, cuddle, and express affection toward your child when the tantrum is over. This affection shows your child that you still love and care for him.

Avoiding Tantrums

Beyond meeting children's physical and emotional needs, there are other things parents can do to avoid tantrums. Parents find tantrums often happen in busy public places like grocery stores and malls. Children can quickly become overstimulated by a lot of people, a lot of lights, and a lot of products surrounding them. They may feel overwhelmed and act out by having a tantrum. The following are some tips to use to prevent a tantrum:

- Make sure your child is rested and avoid being out during his nap time.
- Give your child a healthy snack before you leave the house.
- Explain to your child the behavior you expect from him while at the store, the mall, the playground, etc.
- Don't make outings too long. Children have a limited amount of patience. Make sure not to push them beyond their limit.

- Bring along activities. Games, coloring books, or a favorite toy can serve as good distractions.
- Give your child a few minutes' warning before ending an activity. For example, say, "In five more minutes it will be time to get ready for bed."
- Provide alternatives. For example, if your child can't have a cookie, offer him a cracker or a piece of fruit instead. Choices give a child a feeling of control and may keep a tantrum from happening.

As your children get older, get input from them when deciding rules and routines. If their opinions are considered, they will be less likely to use temper tantrums as a way of being heard.

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***This document uses “he,” “his,” or “him” to represent children of both genders.**