

What can I do?

It might start with a scowl and crossed arms as you put the box of his favorite cookies back on the store shelf. Pretty soon his feet are kicking, he's squirming in the grocery cart seat, and his face is turning red. As you push the cart past the shelf, he reaches for the cookies and his demands of "I want" grow louder.



Shoppers start to stare. You try to hush him in a calm but firm voice saying, "No honey...no treats before dinner." But it's not working. He starts to pound the cart, and out of those tiny lungs now comes a roar that could drown out a jet engine. You look around and see people looking at you. You can imagine the other parents muttering, "I wouldn't let my kid make that kind of racket." You feel embarrassed, frustrated, angry, and it seems like there is nothing you can do to stop it.

Sometimes there isn't, and that's okay. But, there are things that you can do to help both you and your child get through this challenging time.

Temper tantrums are a normal and very common part of growing up. Ignore those eye-rolling critics. Your child's extreme display of kicking, screaming, and crying is not a bad rap on your parenting skills. Viewed another way, tantrums can even offer a great "parenting moment" to help your child learn to deal with strong emotions. So, stay calm and stay close. Your child needs you to be there.

The good news is tantrums don't last forever.

No matter how you try to avoid them, tantrums happen. But there are some things you can do to make them easier for you and your child.

Helpful parenting tips

- ★ Take a deep breath and try to stay calm. Getting upset doesn't help matters and likely will make things worse.
- ★ While it might be tempting to give in when your child is throwing a tantrum, set and keep limits with your child. Kneel or bend down to your child's level, stay close and touch him soothingly. With young children, try sitting them on your lap if that comforts them.
- ★ Some children do not like to be touched when they are upset, so pay attention to what seems to work for your child.
- ★ It may take a few minutes for your child to settle down, but a little time can make a big difference in how your child responds.
- ★ During a tantrum, don't expect her to explain what's wrong. She might not even know; and if she is pressured to communicate her feelings when she feels out of control, it could make it worse.
- ★ Even though occasional tantrums are normal, it is still not okay for children to hit or damage things. Explain that hitting is not okay, and just like you wouldn't let anyone hurt them, you won't let them hurt themselves or anyone else. Children always need to feel safe.
- ★ Tell your child that you are right there with her and that you understand she is upset. Once she has settled down, talk about what happened. "I know you are mad that you can't have a cookie, but we are going to be eating dinner soon and it would spoil your appetite."
- ★ Don't punish a child for throwing tantrums. Use it as a chance to help her deal with overwhelming emotions and stressful situations.
- ★ Evaluate your own responses to your child's temper tantrums. What has worked? What has not worked? What new techniques could you try?
- ★ If your child seems to have more frequent or more severe tantrums, or they are not decreasing with age, discuss your concerns with your child's health care provider.

For more information on parenting and early learning,
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Research Spotlight
2 to 4 years



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Tantrums Happen!

They're not fun, but they're a normal part of childhood.



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It really is a phase.

For kids, tantrums are like stuffy noses: eventually, everyone gets one. In fact, they are probably going to throw a number of them. Tantrums occur in children from about 18 months of age to about 4 years and they are the most common behavior problem reported by parents. Tantrums can include the following: stiffening of the body, dropping to the floor, shouting, screaming, crying, pushing or pulling, stomping feet, hitting, kicking, throwing objects, or running away. The good news is that, as children grow older and learn to handle their emotions, the number of tantrums that occur tends to decrease (Potegal and Davidson 2003). While you are waiting for this phase to pass, take the opportunity to connect with your child, learn about who she is, and help teach her ways to understand and cope with her feelings.

Is this a declaration of independence?

So why does your child melt down from time to time? There could be so many reasons, in addition to the obvious ones of being hungry, tired or not feeling well.

For the first few years of life, children spend much of their time developing close relationships with parents and caregivers. Unable to move around on their own, the world they explore is the one within arm's reach. But, as they master the art of crawling and walking, they develop the ability to decide for themselves where to go and what to touch. Meanwhile, they are learning how to express their desires ("no" and "mine" are favorite words) and deal with the emotional fallout when they don't get their way.

These emotional explosions are part of a child's normal efforts to establish a sense of individuality and autonomy, a sort of declaration of independence from mom and dad. Your child is showing you that he can think for himself and that he has desires and motivations that are separate from you (Thompson, 2001). As challenging as dealing with a temper tantrum is for a parent, having a mind of your own is an important part of growing up.



If only you were a mind reader

You can't always know the cause of these emotional outbursts. The world can look very different from a child's point of view. The inability to express, or even understand, desires or feelings can cause frustration to build and boil over into a tantrum. There are many contributing factors to a child's emotional state and sometimes it is the sum total that leads to the meltdown. Looking back at the situation that led up to the tantrum may or may not provide some hints. Play detective and ask yourself a few questions. Was she tired or hungry? Was she frustrated because everything was moving too fast? Did she want to stay at home when I needed to go shopping? Was that a new activity? Did she feel threatened in some way?

Try to figure out what triggers a tantrum for your child. Decode and respond to his cues before they build into frustrations or meltdowns. Sometimes a child will start to communicate his feelings in subtle ways, such as frowning, sighing, or pulling away. Reading and responding to those early cues of building stress may help prevent a tantrum. If you know that your child dislikes going to the grocery store because she wants to stay home and play, prepare her ahead of time for your shopping trip together. Assign her a job, such as holding the shopping list and pen. Have her hold the bag open while you drop the apples in. Alternatively, let her bring a small toy or book to play with in the cart while you shop.



Sometimes distraction works

Another way to prevent a tantrum is to distract or redirect a child with another task (Thompson, 1994). For example, three-year-old Jenny and her playmate Amanda are having a fun play date at your house. You know that Amanda's Dad is on his way to pick her up. Give the girls a ten-minute alarm. Letting them know what is going to happen helps them prepare for Amanda's departure. Then, give them a five-minute alarm, a two-minute alarm, and so on. Jenny may still get upset when Amanda leaves. She may pout, stomp her feet, and cross her arms over her chest. Distract her with a new task by saying, "Let's go outside and ride our bikes together." By distracting a child with a new task, you are modeling good behavior, and you may prevent a temper tantrum from happening.

Use this as a chance to teach

One of the most important things you can do for your child in these intense moments is to help him learn how to handle upsetting situations. Learning how to manage negative emotions is a critical step in your child's social and emotional development (Kopp, 1989; Thompson, 1988). A two-year-old's desire for independence is important, but tantrums must evolve into learning ways to cope with feelings like anger and frustration.

One thing you can do during a tantrum is to stay calm and stay close. A tantrum is no fun for you, but if you lose your cool it will likely make the tantrum worse. Your child needs you to show her how she can calm her body down by taking slow deep breaths and being still. A gentle hand on her back while you say, "I know you are angry and when you calm down we'll talk about it. Let's take a deep breath together. I am here for you," may give your child the prompts she needs to calm down.

Then, when things are calmer, one of the best things you can do is to talk to your child about his feelings (Gottman & Talaris Research Institute, 2004). Take advantage of the moment to connect with your child by listening to him with empathy. Research suggests that helping children name the emotions they are feeling can be effective. Tell him that you know he is feeling angry or frustrated or hurt. Let him know that you understand the emotion. You might say, "Hey, we all feel upset when we can't have something we want." Then explain why eating a cookie right before dinner isn't such a good idea. Help your child understand the causes and consequences for feelings. Find a solution together to help you both get through the next time. Ask him, "What can we do to fix this? Yes, you can have a cookie after you eat your dinner."

Patience is a virtue

Even these techniques might not be enough to calm a child in the midst of a monumental meltdown. Sometimes you just have to let the steam blow. If you feel yourself needing a break from the moment, it is okay to leave the room or put your child in his room until he calms down. Stay within view so that you know he is safe and he knows you are still there. Say, "I am going into the kitchen and when you calm down we'll talk about it." Sometimes parents need breathing room too.

It can be tempting to punish a child for throwing a tantrum. But remember, as tough as tantrums are for you, they are a normal part of your child's emotional development. It can be very scary for a child when her emotions run hot and she doesn't know how to calm down yet. Try to see these outbursts as a chance to build trust with your child. She really needs you to stay cool and help her learn to deal with upsetting situations.

You are teaching your child that even though things will happen in life that he doesn't like, he can learn to make good decisions about calming down and feeling better.

