

Temper tantrums

About temper tantrums

Almost all young children (under the age of roughly 5 years) have temper tantrums once in a while and even though tantrums can be frustrating and challenging to manage, the occasional tantrum is nothing abnormal at all. Tantrums can involve behaviours ranging from whining and crying, to screaming, kicking, hitting, falling down and breath holding.

Children feel frustration just like adults do. If something doesn't work the way you would like it to, you might swear under your breath or slam a door as a result. This is an adult version of a temper tantrum.

Young children experience the same feelings of frustration. In fact, because of their limited vocabulary it is possible that they feel frustrated and 'unheard' a lot more often than we do. Young children also still need to develop effective problem solving skills, so when they are faced with a challenging situation (not getting what they want to, having their toy taken by another child, etc), they may well just lack the abilities to cope with this situation effectively. Additionally, children do not have the same inhibitions as adults do, so when they feel like screaming, they go for it! The result is a classic temper tantrum.

So a tantrum is an expression of frustration a lot of the time, and children do not plan tantrums just to annoy you. However, it is important that they learn and develop more effective and appropriate behaviours, so temper tantrums should be addressed if they occur. Coping with a temper tantrum can be very frustrating, particularly if they occur in public when other people are staring at you and the child in your care.

Key points:

- Temper tantrums are not planned and the child is not 'out to annoy you'; the child is not your enemy.
- Temper tantrums are very common, and even the best behaved toddler is prone to the occasional tantrum.
- Temper tantrums are meant to get your attention. Even if you scream at the child you are given them what they want; your undivided attention.

Things to think about

Temper tantrums can occur for many reasons, but are often a result of the child feeling stressed and frustrated, hungry, tired, or over-excited. They also often occur in situations when the child finds him/herself in a situation that they can not cope with. They often occur when a child feels they are not getting enough attention.

Think about yourself

Children having temper tantrums will often evoke strong feelings of frustration, anger and embarrassment in the people who are trying to support them. Being able to stay calm in response to a temper tantrum is dependent on being aware of your emotional response to the situation. Often, even with the best will in the world, temper tantrums are difficult to manage and the outcome is not always satisfactory. Being able to remain consistent in your approach, in the face of doubts and feelings of failure, is essential for the long-term resolution of this common behaviour.

What you can do

During a tantrum

- Try to remain calm. If you shout at the child or get agitated you are likely to make the situation worse. Remaining calm yourself can help calm the child down, and it also sets a positive example.
- Physically hold or restrain a child that may cause harm to themselves or others. Let them know what you are going to do by telling them calmly that you can see that they are very angry and that you are going to hold them until they calm down. Holding the child in itself can be comforting and reassuring to them.
- For very young children, distraction can work very well. Try to get his/her attention focussed on something else.
- For older children, ignoring them is often a very effective way to end a tantrum and prevent future ones. If they do not get what they want (that is, your attention) then the tantrum is pointless. However, this can be difficult or embarrassing to do in public places.
- Introduce 'time-outs' in a safe environment, such as at home. These need to be explained to a child when they are calm, but can then be used when a tantrum occurs. During a timeout the child sits in a boring place for a set amount of time, usually one minute for each year of their age. This needs to be explained calmly to a child.
- Avoid 'giving in' to the tantrum. For instance, if the child is screaming in the supermarket because he/she wants sweets, do not go ahead and buy the sweets to stop the tantrum. This will only make the behaviour more likely to occur again in the future.
- Trying to reason with the child during a tantrum generally doesn't resolve the situation, and again, only means that you are giving them your attention. Instead, talk to them after they have calmed down, and try to teach them how to ask for help and express their feelings in words rather than by kicking and screaming.
- After it is over make sure that the child knows that you do not approve of the behaviour, but also be reassuring. Tantrums can scare young children and they do not like to feel out of control. They need to know that you still love them.

General prevention

- Make sure that you spend enough time with the child. They may just be seeking attention if they are not getting enough of it to begin with, and then any attention will do. Remember that when you scream at a child, you are still giving them 100% of your attention.
- Generally encourage the child to verbalise their feelings, and teach them words that will allow them to do so. If they can express their feelings verbally, then sometimes a tantrum isn't needed to express their frustration or needs.
- If a child copes effectively with a stressful situation, praise them for it. This will make it more likely that they will do this again in the future.
- Stick to a regular routine (e.g. meal and bedtime), to avoid unexpected situations that may be overwhelming or stressful to the child.
- Give the child a prior warning before any change, such as reminding them 5 minutes before their bedtime that they will have to go to bed, or letting them know a few minutes before you're getting ready to go to the park that this is what you will be doing. This will allow the child to get ready for the change.
- Try to avoid situations where the child can get frustrated quickly. Children need to be confronted with challenges in order to develop effective coping mechanisms, but if they are too challenging it'll just be too frustrating and can result in a tantrum.

When to contact a mental health specialist

- If the tantrums occur in combination with other worrying behaviours, such as difficulty sleeping, anxiety, self-harming behaviours.
- If severe tantrums continue significantly beyond school-age.
- If your attempts to help have uncovered issues that you are inexperienced in dealing with, such as sexual abuse.

How to contact a mental health specialist

You should get in touch with your local health centre or hospital to obtain a contact number for the appropriate children and young people's mental health specialists.

Remember - you can contact your local mental health specialists for a number of reasons, for example:

- For advice on how to make a referral about a named child.
- For advice about whether or not to make a referral (it is normal practice to seek this advice without naming the child in the first instance).
- For advice about what to do (once again there should be no necessity to name the child).

By not naming the child you are protecting their right to confidentiality. This method of seeking advice also has the advantage that you do not need to get anyone's consent in advance of your contact phone call.