

If this sounds familiar it is important for the parent to realize that they are not alone. Almost every child has at least a few tantrums while growing up. These tantrums are most common in the toddler years but can extend into pre-kindergarten and beyond.

During toddler hood, children are naturally striving to gain a sense of control over themselves and their environment. They are beginning to actively assert their independence and their individuality. However, at this young age, many children have yet to develop the language skills necessary to verbally express their feelings, wants, and needs. This sometimes results in temper tantrums.

As stressful and concerning as they can be for parents, it is helpful to keep in mind that tantrums are a normal part of children's development and that they won't last forever as long as they don't become a habit. If tantrums do become a habit, they may change form as a child matures; the kicking, screaming tantrums of toddler hood may turn into yelling tantrums at older ages. However, by elementary school most children have long since passed out of this stage. There are many things parents can do to prevent tantrums from becoming a habit.

BEFORE A TANTRUM

Although tantrums can't be prevented altogether, there are many things parents can do to minimize them.

Take care of Yourself

One of the keys to handling tantrums effectively is for parents to take good care of themselves so they can deal with the stress of tantrums. By attending to their own physical, mental, emotional, and social health and well-being, parents can ensure that they have the energy and patience to deal with a tantruming child.

Parent Positively and Consistently

Providing positive, predictable parenting is crucial. Parents need to be certain that their expectations and consequences are age appropriate, reasonable, and consistent. Clearly state your expectations ahead of time and use positive terms. For instance tell a child what to do rather than what not to do. Follow through with consequences in order to provide children with stability and predictability. In addition, it is important to focus on the positives about a child and reward appropriate behavior. These strategies can help decrease tantrums.

Monitor the Child's Environment

Parents can also monitor a child's surroundings to minimize situations likely to lead to tantrums. Tantrums often occur when children are tired, hungry, frustrated, over stimulated, or upset. They may also be common when children hear No or Don't too often. It will minimize talk that leads to conflict. For example, when your child asks for a cookie before dinner, tell him he may have one after dinner. Also it may be

beneficial to make the home environment child-friendly by putting away items like breakable vases or prized artwork until children are older.

Acknowledge Children's Feelings

One of the primary reasons tantrums occur is because toddlers don't yet know how to express their feelings and needs in more appropriate ways. Parents can help out by acknowledging children's feeling. For instance Susan's mother could have said, "You really want that chocolate bar, don't you? It's making you mad that we can't buy it now." When partners put a child's feelings into words, it sends the message that they understand and value the child's feelings. It can also help to say "It's okay to be mad, but I need you to use your quiet voice."

Teach Ways to Express Feelings

Teaching children to use words to express their feelings is important. Learning to say "I'm mad" "I'm Sad" and "I Want" helps children become effective communicators and problem solvers. However, if children are too young or too upset to verbalize their feelings, partners can help by teaching alternate means of expression. Drawing a "mad picture" or dancing an "angry dance", can help children to release their emotions. If parents encourage and reinforce healthy ways of handling feelings, children will learn more appropriate behaviors.

Be a Role Model

Children learn by observing parents, so it is important to be a model of desirable behavior. If a child sees his or her parents yelling or hitting when they get angry, a child may use those

strategies when he or she is angry, as well. Every day parents are important role models who can use their own behavior to teach children healthy ways to deal with feelings. For example, when Mom feels upset she can say "I'm mad!" and draw an angry picture.

DURING A TANTRUM

Even if parents do their best to prevent tantrums, they are bound to happen occasionally. Here are some tips for how to deal with those inevitable tantrums. It is best to handle the first few tantrums as well as possible so they don't become a habit

Intervene If Necessary

Of course, parents need to be prepared to intervene during a tantrum if a child is hurting herself, others, or the environment. Moving furniture out of the way allows for more space and prevents possible injury. Moving the child to another space or room may be appropriate also. It also may be necessary to hold the child to prevent injury. Holding the child facing away from you is suggested because it avoids reinforcing the child's behavior with eye contact and attention. Although it can be difficult, the best strategy is to try to stay calm. Yelling or scolding a child during a tantrum is not helpful and may actually escalate things.

Avoid Reinforcing Tantrums

It is important to acknowledge the children's anger or frustration first, and then avoid reinforcing the tantrum with attention. Tell the child that you see they are angry and will talk to them when they are calm. Then remove

attention from the tantrum by keeping busy and staying slightly away from him or her. Avoid talking or making eye contact with the child. Some parents find it helpful to sing or move around continuously to avoid being an attentive audience. Vacuuming can even work quite well because it drowns out the child's screaming and makes it difficult to engage in a battle. This strategy requires a lot of patience because parents need to outlast the child's tantrum. If a parent gives in part-way through a tantrum, the child learns that throwing a tantrum is an effective way to get what he or she wants.

Laughter May Be Helpful

Some parents like to use humor as a positive way to distract children from a tantrum by asking a question like, "Is your anger as big as a hundred thundering clouds or only as big as one thundering cloud?" Be careful, however, since not every child responds well to the use of humor. If handled inappropriately, a child may feel teased or ridiculed.

When tantrums occur at home

- make sure the child is safe
- Keep calm
- Acknowledge the child's feelings
- Encourage children to express their feelings in words
- Encourage older children to express their feelings using art (drawing, dancing, etc)
- Let the child know that you will talk about the situation when he or she is calm

- Avoid rewarding or punishing a tantrum

When Tantrums Occur Away from Home

- follow the above recommendations where applicable
- Immediately remove the child from the situation—a simple change of scenery can sometimes distract a child and put a stop to a tantrum

AFTER A TANTRUM

Console and have a brief chat

Children are often frightened and sometimes confused by the intense emotions they feel during a tantrum. As a result, children often need to be consoled once the incident is over. A big hug or a warm cuddle can sure help. One of the most important things is to let a child know, "I didn't like that tantrum but I still love you." Then you can briefly and calmly discuss the situation, suggesting things the child can do the next time they feel that way.

Think about What Happened

It can be useful to take some time following a tantrum to try to understand what led up to it and how to handle the situation next time. Once you are calm, try to figure out what caused the tantrum. Sometimes parents can gain insight into what caused a tantrum, but sometimes it's just not possible to know why a tantrum happened.

Either way, it is useful to devise an "action plan" for next time. If Susan seems to have difficulty putting her feelings into words, her

mom can help her practice using feelings words like angry, mad etc. Then the next time Susan gets angry her mother can remind her to use her words.

In the end, it is important to remember that some temper tantrums are a completely normal part of toddler and preschool development. As long as tantrums don't become habitual, children will move out of this stage as they develop and mature.

Suggested Readings

Crary, E. (1994) *Love and Limits: Guidance tools for creative parenting* Seattle: Parenting Press

Crary, E. (1993) *Without spanking or spoiling: A practical approach to toddler and preschool guidance.* Seattle: Parenting Press

Forehand, R., & Long, N. (2002) *Parenting the Strong Willed Child: The Clinically Proven Program for Parents of 2 to 6 year Olds*: New York: McGraw Hill.

Hogg, T., & Blau, M. (2005). *The Baby Whisperer Solves All Your Problems (By Teaching You How to Ask the Right Questions)* New York: Atria Books

Kurcinks, M. (1998) *Raising Your Spirited Child.* New York: Harper Collins

Temper Tantrums

Survival Guide for Parents

Four year old Susan and her mother are at the drug store waiting in line when she grabs a chocolate bar and demands "Buy this!" . Her mother responds that she cannot buy it. Susan whines and pleads until her mother takes it away from her and puts it back on the shelf telling her that she can have a snack when she gets home. Susan starts screaming and throws herself to the floor. Her mother is embarrassed and wonders how to handle this outburst