

## Understanding and Dealing with Temper Tantrums

Where does the phrase “throw a temper tantrum” come from? Once you witness a tantrum, you’ll understand. You might see a two-year-old girl so angry that she will scream, cry, throw herself on the floor, and flail her arms and legs. She may even hit and kick anyone who dares to come near. Unfortunately, temper tantrums are a normal part of growing up, and most boys and girls have them at one time or another. Although there are no magic cures, understanding some of the reasons for tantrums can help parents and other caregivers cope with them. There are also some useful techniques to try when a child is in the midst of a temper tantrum.

It can be helpful to know that a child’s need for autonomy—independence—is often the root cause of a tantrum. Children want a sense of independence and control over their environment. When children realize that they can’t do something on their own, a tantrum may result from their frustration. While tantrums are often associated with toddlers, they occur at different ages for different reasons.

### INFANTS

Infants may cry a lot, but they don’t really have tantrums. Crying is their way of communicating that they need something. Some infants seem to cry endlessly for no reason. They may have colic, a painful condition. Studies show that infants who have their needs met quickly, and who are held and comforted when they cry, develop a strong sense of security.

### TODDLERS

Toddlers are most likely to have temper tantrums. These occur for various reasons, even relatively minor ones. Toddlers become frustrated very easily, and they are not able to fully communicate their feelings. They also have not yet

developed problem-solving skills to help ease their frustrations. Temper tantrums are most likely to happen when toddlers are hungry, tired, or overly excited.

### PRESCHOOLERS

Preschoolers have fewer temper tantrums because they have better problem-solving skills. A larger vocabulary allows them to communicate better. When things are not going their way, however, preschoolers may behave like two-year-olds. Four-year-old Grant had a temper tantrum at a store over an art set that he wanted. When he started to scream and kick, his embarrassed mother put the toy in the cart just to get him to stop. If people give in to their demands, children learn quickly that tantrums can be used to get what they want.

### AVOIDING TANTRUMS

Although it may be impossible to avoid all tantrums, here are some strategies that may help:

- **Make sure the child isn’t seeking attention.** For some children, negative attention, such as a caregiver’s response to a tantrum, is better than no attention at all. Try to catch children doing good things and reward them with positive attention.
- **Offer choices when possible.** Being able to choose gives a child a sense of some control. You might give choices for a snack, which toy to play with, or whether to wear the orange shirt or the blue one.
- **Help children stick to a regular routine.** Predictable schedules help children understand what’s going on and what will be happening next.

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- **Give a few minutes' notice before ending an activity.** Children often have trouble dealing with sudden changes in activities.
- **Examine situation.** Is it possible that there are too many rules and “don'ts” in the child's life? Are there other ways that adults are unintentionally increasing the likelihood of a temper tantrum? For example, Tommy's father realized that Tommy's tantrum was partially caused by being hungry and tired from being taken on too many errands.

### HANDLING A TANTRUM

- **Stay calm.** This is essential when dealing with a child who is having a tantrum.
  - **Set a positive example.** Spanking or screaming at the child sends the message that these behaviors are acceptable. Stay in control of yourself and your emotions. Speak quietly to the child.
  - **Pause before you act.** Take at least 30 seconds to consider how you will handle the tantrum.
  - **Consider the cause.** Tantrums may need to be handled differently depending on the cause. Try to understand the reason for the tantrum.
- For example, if the child has just experienced a great disappointment, you may need to provide comfort and support.
- **Ignore.** If the tantrum poses no threat to you, the child, or others, try ignoring it. Stay nearby and continue your activities. If you begin an activity that the child likes, such as playing with blocks, he might become interested enough to stop the tantrum.
  - **Distract or remove.** Try offering a replacement for an object that is off-limits to a child. If necessary, move the child to another area of the room. Leave a store or other public place, leaving behind planned purchases, if necessary.
  - **Wait it out.** Wait until the child calms down before talking about the situation. Don't expect to be able to reason with a screaming child.
  - **Teach coping skills.** It is important to discuss the behavior in a calm manner to teach the child how to handle anger and to deal with difficult situations.
  - **Don't give in.** Don't reward children by giving in. They will learn that tantrums are effective for getting their own way. Instead, verbally praise the child for regaining control.

### Taking Action

Describe how you would handle a three-year-old's temper tantrum in the following places: at home, in the ticket line at a movie theater, at a neighbor's home.