

Tantrums

Tantrums—just the thought of one is enough to make you cringe.

Most parents agree that there is nothing quite like dealing with a kicking, screaming child. It can bring out the worst in all of us, and it is always difficult to handle. Tantrums are a normal part of growing up. All children have them. Often they happen for different reasons at different ages. Sometimes they take you by surprise, and sometimes they are predictable. There are no magic cures, but there are some successful strategies that can help.

INFANTS

Infants may cry a lot, but they don't really have tantrums. They cry because they are wet, hungry, cold, or lonely. Crying is their only way of letting adults know that they need something. 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 and well-being and may actually cry much less later on.

Make sure basic needs are met. Is the baby hungry? Is it nap time? Is the baby overstimulated? Is it time for a diaper change? Does the baby seem ill?

Period of Purple Crying®. Researchers have studied crying and have found that many babies around two to three months old seem to cry a lot. The crying may come and go. They seem to cry endlessly for no apparent reason and may even look like they are in pain. The crying seems to be worse in the late afternoon and evening. And the crying can last for hours—sometimes as much as five hours a day! This can be a trying circumstance even for the most loving parent.

It is easy to become frustrated and overwhelmed with a crying baby. If you are in this situation and are struggling to cope, it is best to lay the baby down in a crib on their back. Then step away and take a break for a few minutes.

Soothing techniques

- Increase attention and close contact before the baby/toddler starts crying. This helps to reduce crying overall.
- Offer a pacifier.
- Change the baby's position and perspective (if baby is lying down, lift and carry or put in an infant seat, or try walking with baby).
- Babies respond well to rhythmic and repetitive sounds and patterns (a lullaby, a humming fan, or a "white noise" CD).

Reach out to a trusted friend or family member to help you get through this challenging stage.

Never shake a baby. Babies and toddlers have weak neck muscles. Shaking can cause the fragile brain of a very young child to bounce back and forth inside the skull. This can cause bruising, swelling, bleeding, brain damage, or even death. Shaking a baby often results in permanent damage called Shaken Baby Syndrome (SBS).

TODDLERS

Toddlers throw tantrums for many reasons—some big, some small. A square block won't fit in a round hole. Shoes feel funny and socks don't seem to come off right. To make matters worse, you won't let them climb on top of the kitchen table. Toddlers have tantrums because they get frustrated very easily. Most toddlers still do not talk much. They have trouble asking for things and expressing their feelings. Toddlers also have very few problem-solving skills. Tantrums are most likely to happen when toddlers are hungry, exhausted, or overexcited.

Stay calm and in control. Toddlers have slightly stronger neck muscles than young infants but can still be vulnerable to Shaken Baby Syndrome. If you find your frustration mounting, take a break and step aside. Make a plan for yourself. Find a safe supervised space where you can leave your child for a few moments. Identify a calm and understanding person whom you can call and talk to or ask for help. Think about something you can do to calm yourself down, such as drinking a cup of tea or listening to music.

PRESCHOOLERS

Preschoolers are less likely to throw tantrums. They have developed more coping skills and are able to communicate better. Still, when dinner is late or when things get frustrating, your preschooler may begin to behave more like a two-year-old! Some children learn at this age that tantrums can be used to get something they want. If parents give in to demands, tantrums may begin to occur with greater frequency.

IF SOMETHING DOESN'T SEEM QUITE RIGHT

Developmental concerns. If your preschooler is having frequent "meltdowns" for no apparent reason, share your concerns with your health care professional. Frequent tantrums after age three can sometimes be a sign of a cognitive or behavioral delay or disability. Getting help early on can make a tremendous difference for a child.

Stressful life events and trauma. Sometimes children experiencing challenging life events—such as a move to a new home, parental job loss, change in child care, family divorce, or death—will regress developmentally. Tantrums and outbursts become more common. Depending on the situation, this can last for many weeks or months. Explore your options for reducing stressful circumstances. If the situation seems extreme, family counseling can sometimes be helpful.

SBS IS 100% PREVENTABLE.

It's the leading cause of death and disability in infants.

30% of SBS VICTIMS DIE.

Nearly all survivors will require lifelong care for disabilities.

Long-term consequences of shaking a baby or toddler

- Physical disabilities
- Blindness; Hearing impairment
- Speech disabilities
- Cerebral palsy
- Seizures
- Behavior disorders
- Cognitive impairment
- Death (immediate or may occur later)



SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN

Older children are typically more tolerant of frustrating situations, but they too get overly tired, hungry, and irritable. Although school-age children have developed stronger problem-solving skills, they are faced with increasingly complex social situations and need help with their problem-solving skills. Learning to get along with friends, work as part of a team, or compete in a sport requires skills that many older kids haven't fully developed yet.

Coach your school-age child to help polish social skills. Kids who have limited problem-solving skills or difficulty expressing themselves with words are more likely to have tantrums or fits of anger. Older children can learn to recognize when they are feeling upset or frustrated. Also, they can learn coping skills and acceptable ways to deal with their anger.

HOW TO HANDLE A TANTRUM

1. **Try to remain calm.** Shaking an infant or toddler can cause permanent brain damage. Spanking or screaming at your child tends to make the tantrum worse instead of better. Set a positive example for your child by remaining in control of yourself and your emotions.
2. **Pause before you act.** Take at least 30 seconds to decide how you will handle the tantrum.

Four possible ways to deal with a tantrum include the following:

Distract: Try to get your child's attention focused on something else. If your child screams when you take away something unsafe (like mommy's purse), offer something else to play with. This technique works well with toddlers.

Remove: Take your child to a quiet, private place to calm down. At home this may be the child's room or a special "cooling down" place. Out in public it may mean sitting outside for a few minutes or in the car, while still supervised. Avoid trying to talk or reason with a screaming child. It doesn't work! Stay nearby until your child calms down. Then you can talk and return to whatever you were doing.

Ignore: Preschoolers will sometimes throw tantrums to get attention. Try ignoring the tantrum and go about your business as usual. If staying in the same room with a screaming child makes you uncomfortable, leave the room. If necessary, listen to music and lock yourself in the bathroom for a few minutes.

Hold: It is OK to gently, but firmly, restrain children if they are "out of control" (may harm themselves and others). You also might say something like "I can see you are angry right now and I am going to hold you until you calm down. I won't let you hurt me or anyone else." Often this approach can be comforting to a child. Children don't like to be out of control. It scares them. An adult who is able to take charge of the situation, remain calm, and be in control can be very reassuring.

3. **Wait until your child calms down before talking about the situation.** It's difficult to reason with a screaming child. Insist on a cooling-down period and follow up with a discussion about behavior.
4. **Help older children problem-solve.** Use this opportunity to teach your child acceptable ways to handle anger and difficult situations. With practice and coaching,

preschoolers and school-age children can learn the following:

- How to ask for help
- When to go somewhere to cool down
- How to try a more successful way of doing something
- How to express their feelings and emotions in words (rather than hitting, kicking, or screaming).

5. **Comfort and reassure your child.** Tantrums scare most kids. They often are not able to understand the reason for their anger and generally feel shaken when it is all over. They need to know that you do not approve of their behavior, but that you still love them.

AN OUNCE OF PREVENTION

Tantrums are a normal part of growing up. All children will have them sometime. If tantrums seem to be happening often, you might consider the following suggestions.

Stick to a regular routine.

Predictable mealtimes and bedtimes are particularly important. Make sure children have time for active play every day.

Share your expectations. Talk with children and teach them about what you expect them to do. For example, hold hands in the parking lot, help you put items in the grocery cart, sit in the car while mom puts groceries in the trunk.



But have realistic expectations.

Know your limits. Young children are not able to sit for long periods of time. A long day of sitting in a car and running errands is hard on adults. And it will almost guarantee trouble with children's behavior.

Consider temperament.

Some children are easygoing, while others do not handle change well at all. Children don't have enough life experience to know what to expect when there is a turn of events. They can easily become overstimulated with new sounds, places, and environments. Take time to give them a "heads up."

Give your child a few minutes' warning before you end an activity.

Saying "We are going to leave the park and go home in a few minutes" or "I wonder what we can cook for supper when we get home" helps your child get ready for change.

Tantrums—A Plan of Action

Ask yourself the following questions:

- When do tantrums occur?
- Where do tantrums happen?
- Who is generally included?
- What happens before, after, and during a tantrum?
- What things can I do to prevent a tantrum from occurring?
- How can I handle a tantrum when it occurs?

Offer real choices. Don't say "Would you like to take your nap?" unless you are prepared to honor your child's choice not to nap. Instead try "It's nap time now."

Choose your battles carefully.

Say "No" to things that are really important. Avoid fighting over little things.

Help children not to "get in over their heads." Children need challenging activities, but not so challenging that they experience overwhelming frustration and failure.

Study your child's tantrums. When and where do they occur? Who is generally involved? What happens before, after, and during a tantrum? Often, looking for patterns can give you clues about conditions or situations that bring out the tantrum in your child.

READ MORE ABOUT IT!

At the Extension Store, store.extension.iastate.edu, search for "Understanding Children," "Ages and Stages."

Prevention of Shaken Baby Syndrome—store.extension.iastate.edu/product/15162

OTHER HELPFUL RESOURCES:

Period of Purple Crying®—dontshake.org/purple-crying

Iowa Family Support Network Early Access—www.iafamilysupportnetwork.org

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PM 1529J | March 2024