

What You Can Do to Prevent and Respond to Tantrums



Prevention

Tantrums from small children can have surprising emotional impact—knocking grown-ups off balance in the moment.

Taking a preventive approach can benefit everyone. Here are some actions you can take ahead of a major meltdown:

- **Separate yourself from your child's behavior.** This can be tough in a culture that blames parents for "doing it wrong" if a child is having a tantrum. Remind yourself that your child isn't purposefully trying to humiliate you—he is just having a hard time coping. Your job is to support, guide, and stay calm. Let the bystanders think what they want.
- **Decide if setting a limit is necessary, also known as choosing your battles.** Get clear on what limits are important, and where you can be flexible. For example, can you live with an outfit that doesn't match, if your child wants to choose her own shirt? The idea is to think about your child's interests and build in ways to meet those needs.
- **Offer advance notice about when an activity is about to end.** "When this book is finished, we're going home," or, "When the timer dings, it's time for your bath." This heads-up will work sometimes, but don't be surprised when it doesn't.
- **Give age-appropriate choices.** Ask, "Do you want the blue or red cup?" or, "Do you want to brush your teeth before or after books?" Avoid asking questions if no choice is actually being offered, for example: "Your job is to put all the blocks back in the box", versus "Can you clean up your toys?"
- **Set your limit with as little emotion (and as few words) as possible.** The more matter-of-fact you can be, the better. Talk in a low, steady voice and be aware of the nonverbal messages you're sending with your facial expression and body language. Using a kind and compassionate tone can be calming to your child. (And, it's also a way to soothe yourself during a stressful time.)

Intervention and Support

Lots of parents ask, "How can I get my child to calm down?" This is tricky because you can't actually make children calm down. What you *can* do is respond in ways that maximize the chance that they will pull themselves together more quickly. Here are some things you can try:

- **Keep yourself calm and present in the face of the tantrum.** When a child is having a hard time, she needs you to be her rock. If you have a big reaction (frowning, shouting, getting upset), your child is likely to get even more riled up, making it harder for her to calm down.
- **Validate your child's feelings and perspective:** Say, for instance, "You really wanted another cookie. Cookies are so tasty, and you are upset that you can have only one." If you skip this step, your child is likely to dial up his reaction to show you just how much he wants another cookie. Skipping this step and going straight to reassurance ("You'll be fine—you'll have another cookie after dinner") may just fuel the tantrum.
- **Honor your child's feelings while holding the limit.** Your child's feelings are not right or wrong. It is how feelings get expressed that can be problematic, such as hitting when angry. Give her some space while continuing to supervise: "You are so upset your whole mind and body are out of control. I will be here by your side and wait for you to calm." You can also make space for feelings ("I see that you are upset."), while putting limits on behavior ("I will stop you from hitting."). This can be done calmly, and without passing judgment or shaming the child.
- **Offer connection, physical comfort, or an alternate activity.** You can ask if he wants a hug or offer a soothing activity like sand or water play. You could share a favorite song or book, or go for a walk together.
- **Model and share how to take a break.** Take a parent "time-out" if you need it (ensuring your child is in a safe place). Create a safe "Cozy Corner" where children can feel relaxed and go to calm down.
- **Offer an acceptable way to "get the mad out."** Some toddlers love learning new words to describe their feelings, such as *furious*, *irate*, and *livid*. You can also offer an activity like ripping paper, stomping feet, or punching a pillow/ball of clay—activities that you see as acceptable ways to express anger.

With lots of modeling and coaching, children learn to soothe and regulate themselves over time. Although tantrums can surely be unpleasant, try to see them as opportunities for your child to learn—about rules and limits, about feelings, and about self-regulation—all critical skills for life.

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