

Parenting - How to deal with toddler tantrums.

Tips to prevent temper tantrums



5 TIPS FOR TODDLER TANTRUMS

- 1 Stay calm and use a neutral tone of voice
- 2 Teach children to recognize and communicate emotions
- 3 Practice calming methods, like taking deep breaths or counting
- 4 Watch for signs that a child is getting upset and address emotions in the moment
- 5 Remind yourself that learning to deal with difficult feelings is a part of growing up

children'shealth? 

Almost all toddlers have tantrums. Tantrums can make parents angry, upset or annoyed. But they are a normal part how a child grows and learns.

“Tantrums are developmental,” explains Eileen Santa-Sosa, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist at Children’s HealthSM. “Infants rely on their parents to calm them. As they emerge from that phase, we sometimes expect them to have the ability to calm themselves, but they are still learning.”

Most of the time, children start to have temper tantrums at age 18 months. Tantrums slow down about age 4. Tantrums happen more often when your child needs help with their basic needs. They may happen when you set limits on them. And they may happen when they cannot have something they want.

How to handle toddler tantrums

During a tantrum, your child may become frustrated or upset. They may whine, cry, scream or fall to the ground. It can be hard to know what to do when your child is having a tantrum. It is not easy to see your child crying or upset. If you are in public, you may even feel ashamed or wonder if people might think the way your child is acting shows you are a bad parent.

The best way to calm a toddler's tantrum is for you to stay calm. Staying calm helps your child calm down. Then you can figure out what caused the tantrum.

"Start by praising your child by saying something like, 'You did a great job calming down,'" says Dr. Santa-Sosa. "You can also use the opportunity to teach your child helpful ways to calm down."

To stay calm, remember the tantrum will end. This is a normal part of growing up. Also, it is how children learn to deal with their feelings. Try not to yell, punish, or hit your child.

To help your child calm down, offer things like a favorite blanket or stuffed animal. Think about whether your child may be hungry, tired or need of attention.

How to prevent tantrums

When your child is calm, talk with them about what they were feeling during the tantrum. Were they angry or sad? Do things together to help them like draw pictures, read a book about feelings or make faces that show how you feel.

Teach them how to deal with their feelings in a healthy way. To practice ways to be calm, take deep breaths, blow bubbles, or count slowly. Over time and with practice, your child will learn how to calm themselves.

It is also good to know the signs that your child is starting to get upset. Helping your child deal with the way they feel may help them not get so upset the next time. Every child is different, but when they are upset, your child may:

- Pout or frown
- Look away from you or not do what you ask
- Say something like "no"

Tantrums can also happen when you set limits. While limits are important to keep them safe. But hearing "no" or "don't" or "stop" all the time is very hard for toddlers learning to do new things.

Dr. Santa-Sosa says to tell the child what you want them to do, rather than what they should stop doing. You can also redirect the way the child is acting. If they are running around, instead of telling them to stop, calmly tell them to sit down. If they are doing something you do not want them to do, start doing something with them that they like instead of saying no or stop.

Here are other things you can do to prevent tantrums:

- Have a regular schedule every day that includes fun, sleep, and regular meals
- Distract them from things they cannot do by showing them something they can do
- Give toddlers more choices so they feel involved and begin to feel some control over their life
- Offer support for their feelings before they get more upset

When to seek help for your child's tantrums

Tantrums are a normal part of how a toddler learns but may become more than normal. If you think your child's tantrums are more than normal, you may want to get help from someone who is an expert in caring for young children.

Signs that tantrums are serious are when your child:

- Has more than 1 tantrum every day
- Is so violent during a tantrum that they may hurt themselves or others

Violent behavior may include hitting themselves or others, throwing things, or other actions that hurt themselves or others. You should get help if you often feel upset by the tantrums. Also get help if tantrums keep your child and family from the things you like to do together.

Talk with your child's doctor about your child's tantrums. They can tell you what to do or refer you to another kind of help.

Find more information about why tantrums happen and how to handle them at zerotothree.com or the American Psychological Association.

Learn more

The Pediatric Psychiatry and Psychology team at Children's Health can help children and parents deal with the way children feel.