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Taming and Tolerating Temper Tantrums

by Becky Spivey, M.Ed.

A *tantrum* is an uncontrolled outburst or expression of anger and frustration by a young child caught up in the challenges of the moment.

You're in the checkout line with your toddler in a busy grocery store. He sees some candy that you don't intend to buy. Soon you're in the eye of a hurricane-force temper tantrum. Everyone's looking at you, waiting for you to "do something with your child," and your face is burning with embarrassment. Could you have prevented the tantrum? What's your best response? Why do these meltdowns happen in the first place?

Why do tantrums happen?



Perhaps your child is having trouble understanding why he can't have something you gave him once before, can't figure something out, or is unable to complete a specific task. Maybe your child can't find the words to express his thoughts or feelings. Whatever the

challenge, frustration with a particular situation might trigger explosive anger — resulting in a temper tantrum.

As adults, our threshold for frustration is much lower when we are thirsty, hungry, or tired. The same is true even more so for a child. When a child is thirsty, hungry, or tired, tantrums are more likely to occur. Too often we see parents dealing with their child's tantrum in the middle of a shopping trip by loudly scolding him. The child is out late and past his bedtime or meal time; yet, the parents expect the child to "behave" by yelling at him to be quiet and sit still. It will not work. It's not fair to a child for his parents to have behavioral expectations the child can't fulfill, and then punish him for not complying.

Do young children have tantrums on purpose?



Many parents would say yes! Sometimes it seems as if your child plans to misbehave (especially in public) simply to get his way. Young children don't always plan to frustrate or embarrass their parents. For most, tantrums are simply a way of expressing frustration. Planning tantrums is a little too cognitively advanced for very young children.

For older children, tantrums are usually a learned behavior. (Learned from whom? Let's guess!) When parents reward tantrums by giving in to what the child is demanding or allow the child to get out of a situation or expectation by throwing a tantrum — the tantrums will likely continue. Typically, the best way to respond to a tantrum is to ignore it.



When your child quiets down after a tantrum (or surrenders), you might say, "Tantrums won't get my attention. If you need or want to tell me something, you have to use your words."

Do I put my child in time-out for having a tantrum?



Dr. Burt Banks, who teaches at the James H. Quillen College of Medicine at East Tennessee State University and has a practice in Bristol, TN, had not set out to be a cranky, loudmouth dad. He felt discouraged, but instead of throwing

in the timer, he delved into the research on childhood discipline to see if science could show him a better way.

He found an eye-opener! First, Dr. Banks learned that he was doing time-outs all wrong. "The key is to completely ignore your child," he says. "A lot of misbehavior in children is done to get attention. Scolding gives them the attention they are seeking. It was actually the worst thing I could do."

The clinical evidence also showed that time-outs don't work unless parents practice "time-ins" — positive, sometimes physical, reinforcements of good behavior. "Periodically, you touch your child's head, or smile, or say a word of praise," he explains. This essential yin to the time-out yang was not something stressed during his days in medical school.

Dr. Banks's review concluded that time-outs are often an effective and appropriate discipline for children up to age 5 or 6, but the technique is poorly managed by parents like him in the real world of tantrums, tears, and sibling smack downs. "Other people are doing exactly what I had done," says Dr. Banks.



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Is there a way to prevent tantrums?

Of course not! There is no foolproof way to prevent tantrums, but there are many things parents can do to divert them, even with the youngest children – and giving in isn't one of them! Consider the following:



- **Be consistent.** Establish and stick to daily routines (including nap time and bedtime) so your child knows exactly what to expect and when. Before a child is born, parents should be on the same page about how they will discipline and rear their child and support each other in their enforcements.



- **Set reasonable limits and follow them consistently.** Plan errands ahead of time and go when your child isn't likely to be hungry or tired. If you're expecting to have to wait in line, pack a small toy or snack to occupy your child's hands and attention.



- **Encourage your child to use words.** Young children understand many more words than they're able to express. If your child isn't speaking yet or speaking clearly, teach him simple sign language for words such as "I want," "more," "drink," "hurt," and "tired." The easier it is for your child to communicate with you, the less likely you are to witness a tantrum. As your child gets older, help him or her put feelings into words. Give your child a sense of control by letting him make choices. "Would you like to wear your red shirt or your blue shirt... eat strawberries or bananas...read a book together, or build a tower with your blocks?" Then compliment your child on making a "good" choice.



- **Beware of the sadness trap.** When you comfort your child in the middle of a tantrum, you are reinforcing the bad behavior. As Dr. Banks advised, ignore the behavior. Afterward, offer support and sympathy and talk with your child about how to regulate his or her emotions. Instead, say 'I'm sorry you got upset. Now that you are calm, we can talk about what just happened. I'm not going to talk to you when you're behaving like that.'



- **Praise good behavior.** Give a hug, extra attention, and always tell your child how proud you are when he or she shares toys, follows directions, etc. If you sense frustration brewing, suggest a new activity, change location, or use other distractions to change your child's focus. Avoid situations that are likely to trigger tantrums. If your child begs for toys or treats when you shop, try avoiding the aisles with eye-level goodies. If your toddler acts out in restaurants, choose restaurants that offer quick service, cater to children, or have a loud, busy atmosphere where no one is really paying any attention to your child anyway. You may need to delay fine-dining experiences until your child is "over" this phase or learns how to manage his behavior.



- **Stay calm and in control.** When you're in control, your child feels secure. If you lose your cool or give in to your child's demands, you're teaching your child that tantrums are very effective in getting his way – every time.

When do children "get over" having tantrums?



As your child's self-control improves, tantrums should become less frequent. Most children outgrow tantrums by age five, but if your young child's tantrums seem especially severe, your older child is having frequent tantrums, or the tantrums have pushed you beyond your ability to cope, share your concerns with your child's doctor. The doctor will then consider any physical or psychological issues that could be contributing factors to the tantrums. Depending on individual circumstances, the doctor might refer your child to a school or community program or, in very severe cases, a mental health provider.

Early intervention can curb future behavioral problems and help your child succeed both at home and at school.



Resources:

Kids' Health – Nemours Children's Hospital. 2013. Why kids have tantrums. Retrieved online September, 2013 from <http://kidshealth.org/parent/emotions/behavior/tantrums.html>
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 Parenting. 2013. Why toddlers throw temper tantrums. Retrieved online September 2013 from <http://www.parenting.com/article/toddler-temper-tantrums?page=0,1>
 Batcha, Becky. 2016. Why time-out is out. Parents. Retrieved online July 2016 from <http://www.parents.com/toddlers-preschoolers/discipline/time-out/why-time-out-is-out/>

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