

Temper Tantrums



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A Program of ZERO TO THREE

Tantrums are normal and common during the toddler years. They often begin when a toddler gains new skills and independence. Some children have a lot of tantrums and other children have fewer. They can be mild or intense. However, they *are* to be expected!

Children have tantrums when they are frustrated. They might also tantrum when they are hungry, tired, or getting sick. Tantrums tell you that your child has lost control and needs help. They can't stop themselves from acting on their desires and feelings. The part of the brain that allows them to regulate their emotions and behavior isn't well developed yet.



SOME TIPS FOR BEFORE YOUR CHILD LOSES IT

- **Decide which behavior really matters.** Sometimes you can avoid the power struggle that might lead to a tantrum. Get clear on what is 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 their own shirt?
- **Do some behavioral "detective work."** You can sometimes help by understanding your child's need and changing *your* behavior. Does your child have an easier time at the grocery store after a nap? Make changes to your schedule and routines when you can.
- **Offer advance notice when an activity is about to end.** Say, "When this book is finished, we're going home." This heads-up will work sometimes, but not all the time.
- **Try distraction, sometimes called redirection.** If your child is focused on something they want or stuck in a feeling, try a change of activity or scenery. Sing a silly song. Let them play with water.
- **Give some choices.** Ask, "Do you want the blue or red cup?" But avoid asking questions if they have no choice. For example, when it's bedtime, don't ask, "Do you want to go to bed?"
- **Offer an acceptable way to "get the mad out."** Try ripping paper, stomping feet, pushing the wall, or punching a pillow.

- **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. Be aware of the nonverbal messages you're sending with your facial expression, body language, and tone of voice.
- **Be clear about what you do want.** Instead of telling your child to stop a behavior, ask them to start the behavior you're looking for. Say, "Keep your feet on the floor," instead of "stop kicking."

WHEN THEY LOSE IT AND YOU WANT TO HELP YOUR CHILD GET CALM

- **Stay calm and steady.** If you have a big reaction (jumping up, yelling), your child is likely to get even more upset. Ignore the tantrum. But don't ignore the child. Stay close, "share your calm," and make sure they don't hurt themselves.
- **Save your breath.** Once a child is having a tantrum, don't try to explain or reason with them. They can't really take in what you're saying, and it will only make the tantrum last longer.
- **Honor your child's feelings while holding the limit.** Your child's feelings are not the problem. It is how feelings *get expressed* that can be a problem, such as hitting when angry. Name the feelings. Say, "I see you are upset." Then, put limits on *behavior*. Gently hold a child's hand to stop them from hitting. Say, "I won't let you hit." This can be done calmly, and without judging or shaming your child.
- **Give them a safe place to be upset.** Create a "cozy corner" piled with pillows where they can feel safe and calm down. Some children will lose control to the point of banging their heads and need help staying safe. Continue to supervise and sit with them if you are calm and it's helping.
- **Try redirection again.** On the other side of a tantrum, your child is still trying to get calm. Offer a soothing activity like kneading playdough. Take a walk, sing a favorite song, or share a story.
- **Be ready to reconnect later.** While you may be irritated or upset after a tantrum, your child may need to be reassured. This is not "rewarding" bad behavior, it's helping your child feel safe so they can learn how to get calm.

Children who can't yet regulate their emotions need lots of modeling and coaching. They also need lots of patience. They learn to soothe and regulate themselves over time, with your support. While tantrums are never fun, try to see them as opportunities for your child to learn about rules and limits, feelings, and self-regulation. These are all critical life skills. However, these outbursts can feel difficult for everyone. Ask your HealthySteps Specialist for support if you feel frustrated or don't know what to do.

SCAN FOR MORE INFO

