



Temper Tantrums

in Toddlers and Preschoolers

Almost everyone has seen a temper tantrum—a youngster totally out of control, screaming, crying—maybe banging his feet on the ground or her head against the wall. This sight is very upsetting for most people. However, with some understanding of the reason for the tantrums, you can often make the situation better.

Usually tantrums begin sometime after the child's first birthday. This is when children start to have minds of their own and strong ideas about the way they want things to be. They begin to want to make their own decisions and to do things for themselves. Since the toddler is unable to communicate any other way, temper tantrums often result when they are frustrated. This is why the toddler period is sometimes called, "the terrible twos." Tantrums—as upsetting as they may be—are a natural part of a child becoming more independent.

In order to encourage your toddler's independence—and to prevent as many tantrums as possible—let your child make many choices during the day. Would he like cereal or toast for breakfast? Would she like her sandals or her sneakers? Would he like his bath now or just before bedtime? This may help your child gain a sense of power and independence. However, don't offer choices when there are none. For example, don't ask, "Would you like to go to day care today?" when the child has no option to stay home.

When you sense that a confrontation is brewing, do some quick thinking. Is this worth fighting over? You'll then have to quickly decide whether to let the toddler have his or her way or to confront the child—before the tantrum starts. Once you decide that an issue is not negotiable, it's important not to give in when the tantrum begins. Be consistent. If you give in, the child will quickly learn to have tantrums whenever things aren't going his or her way. In other words, the child will learn to use tantrums to manipulate you.

Once the tantrum is in full swing, take a deep breath and try not to worry. Although children may look like they're going to hurt themselves from banging their heads, they seldom do. They also don't suffer emotional damage from not getting their own way.

Here are five ways you might react to a temper tantrum:

1. Consider if your child might be tired, hungry, or sick. If so, offer a nap, a snack, or a cuddle.
2. Stay calm. Getting angry will just make it last longer. Don't spank your child. It just communicates that you're out of control too.
3. Use "time-outs" to help your child calm down. This can involve sending your child to a specific chair to sit for a few minutes or to a room to be away from others.
4. Leave the room where the child is having the tantrum. Remember: The tantrum is intended to change your behavior; if you're not present, the tantrum will cease.

5. Don't let tantrums change your behavior as a parent. If you remain firm in whatever decision you made before the tantrum started, your child will learn that a tantrum is not a very good way to get what he or she wants.

Unfortunately, tantrums will not go away overnight, but they should gradually become less frequent as your child grows older. However, some children have temperaments that cause their tantrums to continue even as they get older. If your child is beyond kindergarten and is still having a significant problem in this area, consult your medical professional. And if you feel that the tantrums are making you so upset that your relationship with your child or your partner is suffering, tell your medical professional. He or she can refer you to a counselor or parenting group that can often be of great help.

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Other resources

- Visit The Preventive Ounce: preventiveoz.org
- Connect to our Web site at kp.org to access health and drug encyclopedias, interactive programs, health classes, and much more.
- Check your *Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook*.
- Contact your Kaiser Permanente Health Education Center or Department for health information, programs, and other resources.

This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other health care professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor.