



Guiding your Child Through Tantrums

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It's an embarrassing moment that – if you are a parent- you have certainly experienced.

You're in a store. A restaurant. A movie theater.

Or, the worst of the worst, an airplane.

Your child wants something that, for a myriad of reasons, he or she simply cannot or should not have right now.

And then...an atomic bomb erupts in the guise of a three year old.

They yell, scream, howl, and cry all while sporting a face that has gone from red to purple and you feel like the entire world is Staring. At. You.

Stay calm. Take a deep breath. Remember, your child is really just talking to you.

Though tantrums contribute to parenting stress, it is important to know that tantrums are a communications tool used by young children to express their needs and wants.

Tantrums are most common from children ages 1 to 3, and are equally prevalent in girls and boys.

Every child is different with regards to the frequency and intensity of tantrums. Some kids may have them often and others not so much.

Tantrums are a typical factor in a child's development. When children reach the toddler stage of life, their needs and wants very often outweigh their ability to verbally express the strong feelings that trigger the child's crying, screaming and falling onto the floor.

As children get older and communication develops, tantrums should, and usually do, taper off.

Here are some Tantrum Tactics that will help navigate the minefield of temper tantrums.

- Assist young children to “use their words” to express feelings, needs and wants. Practice using and identifying feelings during play, or read books that describe feelings. As your child develops words to express feelings and wants tantrums as a communication tool will decrease.

- When you can, give young children a choice so they are able to exercise their independence and practice expressing themselves. For example, “Would you like milk or lemonade?” Do not offer a choice when there are not multiple options available that you – as the parent – are okay offering.

- When providing instructions or directions to your child, avoid closed questions. “Do you want to take a bath now?” for example will often lead to many toddlers’ favorite word of, “No.” Instead, consider, “Would you like to take your bath before or after we read our book?”

- Provide praise and positive attention when your child is able to express needs or wants. For example, “Thanks for letting me know what you want – this really helps mommy.”

When tantrums do occur, remember you are your child’s first and most important teacher. Your goal is to help your child safely transition through the tantrum, this starts with you remaining calm. Also:

- Demonstrate empathy, use feeling words to let your child know you understand that he or she is upset.

- Provide directions on what you would like your child to do. Avoid words like “no,” “don’t,” “stop” or “quit.” For example, “Come sit with me, let’s take some deep breaths.” During a tantrum your young child will likely be unable to independently manage their behaviors or remain calm. They will need your support.

- If you are not in a public place and your child is safe, you may opt to allow the child to tantrum. In this situation continue to watch, be present and monitor your child to ensure he or she remains safe.

- Try not to reward a child’s tantrum by giving in. This only reinforces that the behavior was effective. Instead, praise your child when he/she has calmed down or begin to follow your directions. Also, believe it or not, even the youngest of children often know when their behavior was not within what their parents expect. Children will often feel vulnerable after the tantrum. This is a good time to give them a hug and assure them they are very much loved.

- If all else fails, you may need to pick up your child and leave a public place. This is certainly frustrating as a parent, but know that all parents at one time or another have dealt with a tantrum and have been in your shoes.

If you feel tantrums are getting worse, not better as the child ages, or the tantrums are getting more intense, lasting longer, and your child is hurting themselves or others, or is even more disagreeable as he or she gets older, it may be time to call a specialist for help and ensure there are not bigger issues involved.

Carolyn Brinkman leads The Children’s Home of Cincinnati’s preschool, which is a 5-Star Step Up to Quality rated preschool, the agency’s Resilient Children and Families program, and the Every Child Succeeds program. She has vast experience in behavioral health specialties including schools, day treatment, home or community-based settings and has engineered family and community services as well as therapeutic services for young children and families in Greater Cincinnati.



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