



When Feelings are Strong & Intense... (also known as temper tantrums & meltdowns)

Temper tantrums are most common between two and four years. Tantrums are the child's way of showing intense feelings such as anger and frustration.

What might you see?

- Scream, yell, cry, hold his breath
- Kick, bite, hit
- Throw self on the floor, bang her head, pound her fist
- Appear 'out of control'
- They may last a few seconds to over an hour

Why does this happen?

- Young children have tantrums to express their anger and frustration
- They tend to express both positive and negative feelings very strongly
- Preschoolers may use tantrums to gain control and get what they want
- Tantrums often occur when there are disruptions to the child's daily routine and the child is overtired, excited, or hungry
- Over time, children can learn to express their feelings in words. Sometimes you can head off a toddler tantrum early through use of distraction (e.g. "Look what's happening over here.")

What to do during tantrums:

- Try to stay calm (take a few deep breaths) – don't argue, yell or try to 'talk sense' to your toddler (1-3 years)
- Remember the tantrum is your child's way of letting you know he is overwhelmed by strong feelings and he needs you to work through these feelings
- Remove any objects (e.g. toys) that may have started the tantrum
- Help put words to his feelings (e.g. "you feel mad because you Jack took the ball")
- For a preschooler (3-5 years) you can increase his sense of control by using "when..then..." (e.g. "When you are finished yelling, then we will go outside")
- Stay near your child as needed to protect her from getting hurt, harming others or breaking things
- Some children respond to firm, but gentle holding and rocking; others need to have their own space with you close by
- In you are in a public place, gently pick him up and carry him to a quiet area until he calms down
- Don't "give in" to your child's demand because of a tantrum



What to do after the tantrum:

- Reconnect with your child by talking to them after they are calm, talking about the feelings they had and what helped them feel better (e.g. “You were really mad when the ball was taken away. Sitting with mom/dad helped you feel better. I am glad you are feeling better now”)
- Help your child return to playing either the same thing with support to reduce frustration or switch to another activity
- When your child is calm what they can do when feelings get big (e.g. “It’s ok to feel mad, but it isn’t ok to hit or grab. When you are mad you can....[choose from ideas such as: take some big breaths, stomp your feet, ask for help, talk to mom/dad]) Model appropriate ways to work through strong feelings as a way to teach your child about feelings and ways to work through them. (e.g. “I felt mad when I dropped my cup. After I took some big breaths it helped me feel better and now I can clean up the mess.)

How do I stop tantrums from happening?

- Stick to your child’s routine as much as possible, ensuring she has enough sleep and regular meals
- Let your child know what the rules are – set rules that are clear and simple
- Incorporate feeling vocabulary in your language remembering to keep it simple. Start with happy/mad/sad and as children get older you can add feelings such as excited/frustrated/jealous
- Ensure you are giving your child positive attention – establish a habit of catching your child being good and letting your child know you are seeing it. Even just commenting on what they are doing whenever toddlers aren’t having a tantrum can help increase the positive behaviours
- Try to give your child some control over the little things. Offer minor choices (e.g. “Do you want apple juice or orange juice?” “Do you want to brush your teeth before your bath or after?” “Do you want the red cup or the blue cup?”
- Don’t give a choice when there really is no choice (e.g. at bedtime, say “It’s bedtime now” rather than “Do you want to go to bed now?” “It’s time to go to the bathroom.” rather than “Do you want to go to the bathroom?”)
- Teach ways to cool down strong feelings (e.g. running around the yard, jumping and hopping, stomping feet, taking deep breaths, hugging/squishing a favorite stuffie)
- Keep in mind what your child is capable of doing for his age and offer toys suitable to his age.
- Avoid temper tantrums of your own. Children learn what they see. Practice calming strategies yourself to model appropriate expression of feelings and ways to work through them



This information was adapted from The Region of Peel Public Health and Kids Health

