

Temper Tantrums in Young Children: Information for Parents and Caregivers



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Summary: Temper tantrums are common in young children, usually starting around age 1 and usually peaking around age 2-3. Over time, tantrums typically improve as the child develops the capacity for self-expression and self-regulation, with support from caregivers. However, some children's tantrums can be quite severe, causing problems at home and in other settings such as daycare and school. Fortunately, most children grow out of their tantrums by age 4. The good news is that there are many things that caregivers can do to model and teach the skills to overcome tantrums, such as self-regulation skills, frustration tolerance and communication.

Jane's Story: "My knee hurts!" Part 1

Jane is a 3-yo who falls at the playground. She starts crying and runs over to you. She seems physically fine, but emotionally upset.

What would you do?

- Angrily say: "Stop crying, nothing's broken, you're fine!"
- Give her a hug: "Oh my, you've hurt yourself. Let's go back home where you can rest."
- Give her a hug until she stops crying, and with any luck, she'll return to playing again after.

Dave's Story: "I want a cookie!", Part 1

Dave is a 3 ½ -year old who is just about finishing the last chocolate cookie. He says, "I want a cookie!" You say to him: "There are no more cookies!" He gets angry, throws his drink on the floor and starts to cry.

What would you do?

- Punish him for being ungrateful and send him to his room.
- Model self-expression for him by saying, "You're frustrated! You want another cookie!"; then offer a hug to help him calm down.
- Drive to the store to get more cookies.

What is a Temper Tantrum?

Temper tantrums are the severe outbursts of frustration and anger often seen in young children. Frustration and anger may be expressed verbally (e.g. screaming, yelling) and physically (e.g. hitting, throwing, running).

Tantrums usually start around age 1- 1 ½, and get worse between age 2 to 3 (the so-called “terrible twos”).

Around this time, toddlers are starting to develop a sense of autonomy, with their own wishes, preferences and desires.

At times however, this comes into conflict with the wishes and preferences of their adult caregivers, and as a result, this can lead to frustration and tantrums.

It helps when caregivers can:

- Empathize and validate the child’s frustration, so the child develops the capacity to identify and express their own feelings.
- Provide soothing (such as giving a hug to a child) so the child develops the capacity to self-soothe and self-regulate over time.

After many cycles of learning how to deal with tantrums from an adult caregiver, eventually the child learns to self-regulate on their own.

As a result, tantrums usually start getting better around 3, and usually disappear by age 4.

Nonetheless, some children continue to have trouble with emotional regulation. Even older children, adolescents and adults can have temper tantrums when overwhelmed.

Problematic Tantrums

Some children have tantrums much more severe than others their age. They may also have tantrums that persist even though they are getting older. It can be helpful to explore for any other conditions that might be contributing:

Co-occurring condition	Screening questions
• Stressful environment	What’s it like to be this child? Are there things in the home, school, etc. that would be stressful?
• Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)	Compared to other kids their age, are there severe issues with hyperactivity and/or impulsivity?
• Sensory processing problems	Is there over-sensitivity to light? Sound? Being touched?
• Motor / coordination problems	Any problems with acquiring motor skills such as walking? Running?
• Intellectual disability	Are there difficulties with learning / development
• Speech/language	Any concerns about speech / language?
• Autism spectrum disorder (ASD)	Are there troubles relating to other people? Problems with change or transitions? Extreme focus in specific areas?
• Fetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD)	Is there any history of alcohol use in the mother during pregnancy?

Do you suspect any of the above, or other conditions? If so, see your health care provider to explore further.

Strategies for Parents: Preventing Tantrums (In Between Tantrums)

It is always better if one can find a way to avoid and prevent tantrums from happening.

The good news is that there are many things we can do to encourage your child's brain to be in a calm place such as:

- Ensure the child gets enough sleep (e.g. good sleep hygiene, regular bedtime, regular naps).
 - For more information
 - Sleep Problems in Children/Youth: Information for Caregivers
<https://www.ementalhealth.ca/index.php?m=article&ID=21575>
- Daily time outdoors, which for children usually means they are also physically active.
 - For more information
 - Helping Your Children and Youth Be More Active
<https://www.ementalhealth.ca/index.php?m=article&ID=60846>
- Regular meal times with healthy nutrition.
 - Ensuring plenty of vegetables, fruits and complex carbohydrates
 - Limit processed foods and excess sugar. Some parents report that their children can be more easily triggered if they have consumed processed foods or sweet, sugary junk foods.
- For more information
 - Nutrition and Mental Health
<https://www.ementalhealth.ca/index.php?m=article&ID=56669>
- Ensure there are healthy limits on screen time.
 - Is the child aged 3 and under? Recommendations are no recreational screen time for such an early age. Exceptions would be video calls with family members when in-person meetings are not possible.
 - Is the child aged 3-6 and having tantrums? Consider having a screen detox for at least 3 weeks. Some children are easily overstimulated by screens and do better after a screen detox.
 - Is the child aged 6-12? Typical guidelines allow for 1-2 hours recreational screen time / daily for this age. Nonetheless, if possible, still try to aim for recreational screen time only on weekend days and not screen days.
 - For more information
 - Unplug (from Technology) and Connect: Keeping Families Strong in a Wired World
<https://www.ementalhealth.ca/index.php?m=article&ID=2672>
- Promote non-electronic toys, especially for young children. Instead of electronic toys, aim for traditional non-electronic toys, such as wooden toys. Or if you are stuck with electronic toys, remove the batteries. Electronic toys that flash and make sounds have been shown to encourage passivity and discourage creativity.
- Ensure regular routines and structure. It is good to have regular, consistent routines, as opposed to routines that change excessively. Children feel safe when there are consistent routines. Consider writing down the daily routines and schedule, to make it easier for caregivers to create consistency.
- Ensure that the child and caregivers have quality time together. A strong relationship makes it easier for the child to feel safe to express emotions, fears and worries with caregivers.
- Avoid or limit triggers.
 - When interventions can be done to reduce triggers and that help the child's brain stay in the "green zone", then optimal brain development can occur. With this development, the child's brain matures and develops the skills to avert tantrums. On the other hand, it's harder for a brain to develop when it is constantly stressed out
 - Are there sensory triggers from too much noise, too much light, etc.? Try to avoid sensory overloading environments. Go to stores during quieter times, etc.
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Strategies for Parents: What to Do When Your Child Is Starting to Get Frustrated (But Not Yet in a Full Blown Tantrum)

The “yellow zone” is the window when a child has been triggered, and is starting to get emotional, frustrated and upset.

Bad news, in the yellow zone, they are not logical or calm, and so they cannot talk about things logically at this point.

Good news, they are not yet in a full-blown tantrum and so they will still be open to strategies that help with their emotions, such as empathy and validation. And thus hopefully, we can support them to get back to the green zone.

Do's

Connect with them by getting down to the same height, e.g. sit down, kneel down so you can be at the same eye level.

Provide empathy to the child (which also models for them) on how to recognize their feelings and express themselves.

- Example
 - Adult (validate the upset): “Oh my goodness... you’re really upset!”
 - Adult (try to identify the trigger): “You want to keep playing!” “You don’t want to stop playing!”

Give your child strategies to co-regulate:

- Example “Can I give you a hug?” / “Let’s go and sit on the couch.” / “Let’s go outside...” / “Let’s jump on the trampoline” / “Let’s go on the swing a bit!”

Is it a public place?

- If so, then consider going somewhere quieter, and/or ask bystanders to give you space.

Stay calm. Adults need to model self-regulation by staying calm themselves and not getting upset.

Are you too upset to think clearly, and at risk of doing something you’ll regret?

- If so, then take a break. Ask another adult to help out. Do whatever you need to do in order to calm down.

Is your child moving from anger into sadness and crying?

- If so, this is wonderful. Crying helps the brain process the losses that the child is having. E.g. loss of the cookie that are no more; loss of having to stop playing at the park; etc.
- We can comfort our crying child, and help them calm down and move back into “green zone”.

If your child calmer now?

- If so, then wonderful. This is when you might try talking about what happened, and try to problem-solve with your child.

Don'ts

Don’t punish or threaten consequences when a child is already upset. The child’s brain is already in “fight / flight” and further threats won’t help. You may need to set consequences, but this is best done later after everyone (especially adults) is calmer and has had a chance to think through things.

Don’t invalidate how the child feels -- don’t say, “Stop being a crybaby,” “Don’t cry”, etc. Crying is good for helping a child process their emotional distress. Most adults wouldn’t like it if someone told them to stop crying if they were upset.

Don’t overload the child’s already stressed-out brain. Don’t explain too much, or talk too much if they seem overloaded. Keep things brief and move on.

Don't try to be right or win the argument with your child. When your child is older, they won't remember the facts that they were wrong. What they will remember is how they felt around you.

What to Do During a Full-Blown Tantrum: "Red Zone"

Sometimes, despite our best efforts, a child can become triggered and things can still escalate into a full-blown tantrum. When the brain is so overwhelmed, they are in the "red zone". In the "red zone", a child's brain is so overwhelmed in full "flight/flight" that "yellow zone" strategies may no longer work.

Do's

Give the child time and space -- try to "ride out" the storm.

Stay near and keep the child safe until they are calmer.

- Hopefully, they go from the red zone into the yellow zone -- then you can provide empathy, validation and a hug.
- After the yellow zone, hopefully, they go back into the green zone -- then you can talk logically and calmly about what happened.

Reduce anything that might make things worse, such as sensory overload.

- Dim any bright lights.
- Turn down any background noise (e.g. TV, radio)
- Ask bystanders to leave in order to reduce sensory overload.

Offer kindness and compassion as the storm passes.

- Tantrums are exhausting -- after all, your child's brain is in 'fight or flight' mode. As the storm passes, most children start feeling exhausted. They may then start crying, at which point, adults and caregivers can offer kindness and compassion.

Strategies: What About Siblings?

Q. What if the older siblings are saying or doing unhelpful things that make it worse?

A. It is the case that sometimes other siblings get frustrated at the child having a tantrum, and may inappropriately express their frustration.

Model skills that you want everyone to be able to do.

Use connection before direction with the sibling, for example:

- Don't start with correction
 - Don't start by saying "Don't call your brother a cry baby!".
- Connect:
 - Start with validating the sibling, "Its not easy seeing your brother cry."
 - Offer a hug to the sibling. Explain, "Your brother is having a lot of big feelings and upset. The best way for you to help him is to give him some space. Can you please go play in your room until I let you know?"
 - "When he calms down, we can all give him a hug and let him know we love him."

Summary

Tantrums are normally in young children as they encounter frustrations, but do not yet have the capacity to cope with their frustrations. It is important for adults to do their best to stay calm and support the child's emotional regulation -- such as by helping identify and express frustrations, and offering hugs and compassion to co-regulate.

Jane's Story: "My knee hurts!", Part 2

Jane is a 3-yo who falls at the playground. She starts crying and runs over to you. She seems physically fine, but emotionally upset.

- a) Angrily say: "Stop crying, nothing's broken, you're fine!"
- b) Give her a hug: "Oh my, you've hurt yourself. Let's go back home where you can rest."
- c) Give her a hug until she stops crying, and with any luck, she'll return to playing again after. -- **CORRECT!**

Dave's Story: "I want a cookie!", Part 2

Dave is a 3 ½ -year old who is just about finishing the last chocolate cookie. He says, "I want a cookie!" You say to him: "There are no more cookies!" He gets angry, throws his drink on the floor and starts to cry.

What would you do?

- a) Punish him for being ungrateful and send him to his room.
- b) Model self-expression for him by saying, "You're frustrated! You want another cookie!"; then offer a hug to help him calm down. -- **CORRECT!**
- c) Drive to the store to get more cookies.

For More Information

Harvey Karp's Happiest Toddler on the Block. Available as a 45-minute streaming video, DVD or book that shows how to connect and validate a toddler's emotions and feelings. One can also view brief summaries of his techniques on Youtube, by searching "Dr. Karp Happiest Toddler".

Aha Parenting, www.ahaparenting.com. This is a website that has detailed information on a variety of parenting topics including tantrums.

Is your child still struggling?

Consider taking a program such as Triple P or Security of Security, which provide more in-depth strategies to help a child with their self-regulation. In Canada, these can be found at your local children mental health centre or family service agencies.

About this Document

Written by members of the eMentalHealth.ca Team, and Ottawa Public Health (www.parentinginottawa.com).

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