

Tantrums

Temper tantrums usually start at around 18 months and are very common in toddlers. Hitting and biting are common, too.

One reason for this is toddlers want to express themselves, but find it difficult. They feel frustrated, and the frustration comes out as a tantrum.

Once a child can talk more, they're less likely to have tantrums. By the age of 4, tantrums are far less common.

Tantrums come in all shapes and sizes.

They can involve spectacular explosions of anger, frustration and disorganised behaviour – when your child ‘loses it’.

You might see screaming, stiffening limbs, an arched back, kicking, falling down, flailing about or running away. In some cases, children hold their breath, vomit, break things or hurt themselves or other people as part of a tantrum.

This is because young children are still at an early stage of social, emotional and language development. They can't always communicate their needs and feelings, including the desire to do things for themselves, so they might get frustrated. And they're learning that how they behave influences others. So, tantrums are one of the ways that young children express and manage feelings, and try to understand or change what's going on around them.

You may feel exhausted and frustrated when your kid throws a tantrum, but temper tantrums are usually nothing to worry about. Children, especially toddlers, have temper tantrums as part of their normal development. Children often outgrow tantrums by the time they enter preschool, at around 4 years old.

A temper tantrum is when a child has an unplanned outburst of anger and frustration. Tantrums can be physical, verbal or both. Your child

may act out, be disruptive and generally display unpleasant behaviours. Usually, they're acting like this because they want or need something they can't express with words.

Tantrums are often disproportionate to the circumstances. In other words, children react very strongly to what is likely a mild situation. For example, you might tell your child to put away a toy or turn down their treat request. This may lead to thrashing, yelling and hitting.

Causes of temper tantrums can include:

- Frustration.
- Wanting attention.
- Wanting something (such as a treat or toy).
- Avoiding doing something (such as cleaning up or leaving the park).
- Hunger.
- Tiredness.

A big cause of toddler temper tantrums is the conflict they feel. They seek independence but still crave their parents' attention. And they haven't developed coping skills to deal with strong emotions or disappointments. They often lack the verbal skills to explain how they feel, so they lash out instead.

During a temper tantrum, your kid may:

- Whine, cry and shout.
- Kick, hit and pinch.
- Flail arms and legs.
- Hold their breath.
- Tense their body or go limp.

Try these strategies during your child's temper tantrum:

- **Find a distraction:** If you sense a tantrum starting, but it hasn't become a full-blown outburst, try to distract your child. Point out something interesting or engage them in an activity. For

example, you could say, "Look! A cat". Make yourself sound as surprised and interested as you can.

- **Stay calm:** Once your child is mid-tantrum, don't threaten, lecture or argue with them. Doing so only makes the tantrum worse. Later, when your child is quiet and calm, talk to them about their earlier behaviour.
- **Ignore the tantrum:** This shows your child that a tantrum is unacceptable and won't get them what they want.
- **Keep them in sight:** If you're in the middle of the store or other public place, make sure you can see your child (and they can see you) at all times. If you feel your child may hurt themselves or other people, remove them from the environment.
- **Keep them safe:** Remove any dangerous objects near them. Consider holding your child, so they don't hurt themselves. If your child is completely out of control, bring them to a safe space until they calm down. Use a "time-out" if necessary, placing them in a room away from TV and other distractions.

Also, try not to:

- **Give in or change your mind:** If you do that, children learn that tantrums help them get what they want. If you're at home and your child is safe, you can even try leaving them and going into another room.
- **Hit, bite or kick back:** You may think this teaches them that these actions hurt. But the opposite often happens — your child may learn that this is acceptable behaviour because a parent is doing it. Instead, make it clear that they're doing something hurtful, which is not allowed.

Toddler tantrum tips

- Find out why the tantrum is happening
- Your child may have a tantrum because they're tired or hungry, in which case the solution could be simple.

- They could be feeling frustrated or jealous, maybe of another child. They may need time, attention and love, even though they're not being very loveable.
- Understand and accept your child's anger
- Make sure that your child and others nearby are safe. This might mean carrying your child somewhere else if you need to.
- Once your child is in a safe place, calmly acknowledge the emotion they're expressing – speak slowly and in a low voice.
- Stay quietly with your child until they calm down. Touch or hold them if they want you to, or give them more physical space if they need it. Don't try to reason with your child.
- Be consistent about not giving in to demands. This will help your child learn that tantrums don't help them get what they want.
- Try a 'paradoxical instruction'. This means giving your child permission to scream and shout until they're ready to stop. For example, 'You can yell louder if you want to. It's a big park and we're not bothering anyone'.
- Comfort your child when they've calmed down. A tantrum is distressing for everyone.
- You probably feel angry yourself at times, but unlike your child, you can express it in other ways.

What should I do after the temper tantrum?

Once the tantrum is over, you can engage your child in conversation about what happened. You can also discuss how they can stop tantrums from happening again. Try to:

- **Offer praise for calming down:** Reinforce your child's positive behaviour and good choices. Children like recognition for good behaviour. Be as specific as possible. Instead of, "You were so good," say, "You did a great job using your inside voice in the store." These statements help your child know what behaviours are expected and acceptable.
- **Acknowledge their feelings:** Let your child know you understand their frustrations. Offer to help. Often, children are seeking attention, so acknowledging them can help ease their emotions.
- **Teach your child to label emotions:** Children often don't have the vocabulary they need. They can't describe their frustration, jealousy, anger or disappointment. Tantrums are how they express their feelings. Give them the words they need to express themselves: "I see you're angry now. You're crying, and your face is red."
- **Teach your child how to handle strong emotions:** Help them figure out how to deal with a problem without getting upset. They'll learn they can solve some of their problems themselves. They'll become more independent and less prone to tantrums.
- **Set a good example:** Children look up to their parents, watching their behaviour. Model healthy strategies when you're upset or frustrated. Your child will begin to copy your behaviour.

How can I prevent a temper tantrum?

You most likely won't be able to create a tantrum-free environment. Tantrums are how children communicate. It's a natural part of development. But you can take steps to reduce the frequency and severity of tantrums:

- **Give choices:** Let them choose, within reason. For example, they can choose between two outfits or two snacks. Being able to choose helps your child feel in control. Make sure to let them choose between two things you're OK with. Don't give them false hope.
- **Prepare for transitions:** Periods of transition, such as leaving the house or the playground, can be difficult for children. Try to

prepare them in advance that a transition is coming so they're ready for it. And bigger transitions need more preparation. For example, if a new sibling is coming or you're moving, allow plenty of time to prepare your child.

- **Check food and sleep:** Sometimes, irritability can lead to tantrums. This behaviour may come from lack of proper nutrition and sleep. Make sure your child eats a balanced diet and gets enough sleep.