

TEMPER TANTRUMS

Your child is on the floor kicking her feet, crying, throwing her arms around and screaming. You stand back and ask yourself, "What is wrong with my child?" or "What am I doing wrong as a parent?" The answer to both of those questions is "Not a thing." Your child is having a temper tantrum. All children will have a temper tantrum at some time. Tantrums are not limited to the "terrible twos." They can start earlier and last much longer.

WHAT IS A TEMPER TANTRUM?

Temper tantrums are normal and predictable behavior. They are expressions of the child's inner struggles in growing up and becoming independent of his parents. They are especially common in children who aren't yet able to adequately express in words the frustration they are feeling.

The inner struggle that most often results in a tantrum centers on the issue of independence and wanting to separate from you. Your child wants to assert some control over his life. He wants to start making his own decisions about many things: what he eats, how long he plays outside, when to go to bed, etc. He desperately wants to do things his way. At the same time, he searches for limits because he knows he is not able to control himself yet.

This struggle within him will result in feelings such as frustration, stress, anger, fatigue and loss of control. He will express these feelings to gain your attention, to protest not getting his way, to avoid doing something or to relieve stress.

TEMPER TANTRUMS THROUGH THE AGES

OLDER INFANTS

Very early tantrums may erupt when a baby first becomes aware of limitations. He not only resents those limits a loving adult has placed upon him, but he is also frustrated by his own developmental limits. (He can't always do what he wants to do.)



Photo by Howard G. Buffett

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Divert or distract attention away from the issue of conflict. These early tantrums are the simplest to defuse because infants are easily distracted. Provide a change of scenery. A walk outside or to another room is often enough to quiet a distraught baby.

TODDLERS

"No!" is a toddler's favorite word. It is a declaration of independence and a word that has been modeled for him by his parents many times. It is helpful for parents to look at this resistance to cooperation from the toddler's perspective. A toddler must feel powerless. He is a little person surrounded by all these big people constantly giving orders or commands. Saying no gives him some power and that must feel pretty good.

Although it feels like defiance, a toddler who says no is actually accomplishing an important and timely developmental task; he is beginning to separate himself from you. As a parent, you must understand this developmental stage, but not tolerate inappropriate behavior.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Limit your use of the word "No." Save it for dangerous situations (a hot stove) or unacceptable behavior (biting).

Don't ask your toddler questions that can be answered by a "No" such as, "Do you want to get dressed?" or "Let's get dressed now, okay?" Simply state what needs to happen: "It's time to get dressed."

Be respectful of your child when asking her to cooperate with a task. Instead of yelling a command at your child from across the room, move next to her, put your hand on her shoulder and get down on her level so that you can make eye contact.

Use concrete instructions ("Please pick up the balls and put them in the toy box.") instead of vague commands ("Clean up").

Take the "temptations" away for a while. Toddlers have very little self-control and absolutely no concept of the value of your possessions. Your toddler is not deliberately trying to make you crazy; she is just a curious explorer.

PRESCHOOLERS

Around the age of four, temper tantrums become more a test of wills. Your child is starting to say, "Why not?" and "I don't want to." Her cognitive abilities (thinking skills) have improved. One expert states, "*In other words, they've learned how to push your buttons.*" When you get drawn into a power struggle with your child, even if you win, you lose. Your relationship with him is strained. Your victory in the struggle makes your child feel angry and helpless. Consciously or unconsciously he tries to prove to himself (and to you) that he is not so powerless. That proving ground may come in the form of whining all the way to preschool or dawdling when you need for him to hurry.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Offer your preschooler choices whenever possible. Make sure all of the choices you offer are ones you can live with.

Provide time to transition from one event of the day to the next. Tell him that in 5 minutes it will be time for bed. Then set a timer.

Ask your child for her input or allow her to do things her way when possible.

Preschoolers can become obsessed with routine and sameness. They are trying to bring order to their world. They can go into a temper tantrum over the tiniest thing.

Provide your preschooler with a good night's sleep and nutritious meals and snacks.

EARLY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL YEARS

As your child matures you are able to reason with her and explain the principles behind the limits and decisions you make concerning her. She is becoming more responsible for her own behavior. At this age, confrontations will not help you change her undesirable behavior. By the time the situation is at a crisis point, your child is as furious as you are, and she is not thinking about her behavior or the consequences. Instead she is focused on how mean you are.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

Be specific about the behavior you expect and the principles behind it, as well as the consequences for inappropriate behavior. When possible, allow your child to have input into the consequences. In doing so, he knows that he is the one responsible for the outcome of the situation.

PARENTS' ROLE IN TEMPER TANTRUMS

It is important for parents to remember that the temper tantrum is the child's responsibility. He must learn to control his temper and express his frustrations in appropriate ways. Helping your child learn self-control requires lots of patience.

The temperament of both parent and child play a role in the issue of temper tantrums. Because of temperamental characteristics, some children have more temper tantrums than others. For example, if your child is intense in expressing himself, persistent in his ideas, has difficulty in adapting to changes or has a low sensory threshold, he may be more prone to temper tantrums.

Sometimes parents can unknowingly encourage the tantrum behavior by asking the wrong questions, challenging the child with inappropriate toys, inconsistently enforcing limits or having no limits at all.

Never give in to a tantrum. Giving in, which also includes bribing a child to stop, teaches him that having a tantrum will get him his way.

Never respond with violence. Anger only makes a bad situation worse and shows that a parent can't control her own emotions.