



Understanding Tantrums

It is difficult for young children to control or manage strong feelings. Tantrums are normal, expected and developmentally appropriate. Here's why:

The perfect tantrum storm is caused by:

- *Developmentally-appropriate behaviors*
 - Determination
 - Persistence
 - Strong desire for independences and autonomy
 - Desire to be in control
 - Preference for regular routines
 - Strong feelings about the way thing should go. These are often not based in reality.
- *Weak skills for handling big emotions*
 - Poor emotion regulation
 - Limited impulse control
 - Inflexible problem solving skills
 - Low frustration tolerance
- *Temperament of your child*
 - **High intensity:** big emotional reactions
 - **Low regularity:** never predictable
 - **Low mood:** somber
 - **High sensitivity:** extreme reactions to sensory stimulation and things they feel are unfair
 - **low adaptability:** resistant to change of any kind
 - **High persistent:** don't give in (stubborn)
 - **Low distractibility:** difficult to distract

Intervening before the tantrum begins

- **Avoid tantrum triggers and try to predict what may set your child off.** Watch for your child's signs (like their angry face, whiney voice, or tense body language). Get to know your child's tantrum patterns and try to reduce stressors
- **Give warnings before transitions.** "When you're finished with that puzzle, it will be teeth brushing time!" "When the timer rings, we're going to stop playing our game and get our coats on to go outside."
- **Follow an active activity with a calm one.** After running, jumping, etc., suggest some time for reading books, playing with blocks, etc.
- **Distract and redirect.** Use something else to hold your child's attention long enough to redirect their energy into another place.
- **Name the upset feeling.** Get eye-level with your child and verbalize what they are feeling. Recognizing and naming an upset feeling can reduce frustration and be empowering for your child. "Yes! That's right! I am angry!"

Responding after the tantrum begins

- **Listen and support your child's feelings (active listening).** "You're disappointed because you really wanted the monkey bowl and it's dirty."
- **Talk about what you see.** "It looks like you're really angry that you can't use the monkey bowl. You were expecting to eat your oatmeal out of it and now your face and body look angry." Skipping this step makes your child feel like they need to get more upset to make you notice.
- **Set the limit.** "The monkey bowl is dirty, so you can't use it this morning."
- **Offer choices that work for you (limit to two).** Choices give your child a feeling of having some control. "You have a choice. You can use the pirate bowl or the dolphin bowl." Choices must be real and not just threats, for example, "You have a choice. You can use another bowl, or nothing at all."
- **Use language to help your child cope with a big feeling by problem-solving.** "Since you can't eat cereal in a dirty bowl, let's think of something else you could eat your cereal in this morning." "What could we do to make sure your monkey bowl is ready for cereal in the morning?"
- **Manage your child's inflexibility with flexibility.** Being compassionate doesn't mean giving in, but it may mean being creative with solutions.

- **Don't try to reason.** Your child isn't capable of listening to logic yet. Plus, it's difficult to talk to anyone who is out-of-control.
- **Stay calm.** As you get more upset, so does your child.
- **Save teaching for later.** During a tantrum is not the time to teach about what's acceptable to say to someone. Try not to be offended by what your child says during a tantrum.
- **Reinforce the options, but limit back-and-forth negotiation.** Fighting feels powerful to your child. State your child's options but don't negotiate. For example, "It looks like you don't want the pirate or the dolphin bowl. I'll leave them here anyway."
- **Don't give in.** Giving in teaches your child that tantrums work. It will also make it harder to enforce a limit next time.
- **Ignore.** If your child refuses to be distracted, problem solve, or accept an alternative, let them have their tantrum and ignore it. Any attention you give—even negative—reinforces the chances they will tantrum again.

Responding *after* the tantrum ends (later, when your child is calm)

- **Help your child understand they sometimes lose control.** "You get overwhelmed by the things you feel," "Sometimes it's hard to control your body when he feel angry, frustrated, etc."
- **Talk about (if possible) what went well.** "You were angry but you remembered not to hit me."
- **Point out moments every day when your child uses positive behavior.** Be specific so they know exactly what they did right. "Great job because you told mommy you were angry that I turned the TV off!" Use an enthusiastic tone (like a cheerleader!). Use touch (for example, give him a hug, a big pat on the back or a high five).
- **Use unexpected rewards.** Surprise your child when they least expect it with a simple token for a positive behavior (for example, an extra book at bedtime for getting into the bath easily the first time you ask). Rewards that are unpredictable and unexpected are the most powerful for promoting behavior.
- **Help your child identify body signs that signal he or she is losing control** (for example, clenched fists)
- **Talk about how learning to manage emotions takes practice.** Let him know you're going to help him get better and better at it, "I am going to help you get better at not losing control."

- **Teach your child coping strategies for calming down.** Show your child things they can do (like big breaths, marching). Brainstorm strategies together if possible. Let your child know that they have the power to make tantrums stop.
- **Make sure your rules about tantrums are clear.** Clarify and specify your rules for tantrums. “It’s ok to...” “It’s not ok to...” Clearly explaining the consequences in the beginning of a tantrum makes it possible for you to say, “Are you choosing to lose...”
- **Practice being calm** (even when frustrated, angry or told “no”). When your child is calm, you can rehearse, “Okay, let’s practice being angry or frustrated without having a tantrum. I’m going to tell you...and you’re going to show me how to act without...”
- **Point out (natural) consequences of tantrums.** Discuss the negative effects of out of control behavior (for example, broken toys, hurt bodies, losing friends). Remember that difficulty with impulse control is normal and expected in preschoolers, but that all behavior can be improved.