

Picture a common enough scene: A young mother with a toddler in a grocery store. After forty-five minutes of shopping she pulls into the checkout line. Her young child grabs a candy bar from the rack of brightly colored candies and chocolates displayed at perfect eye level to her cart. Mother says “no” and takes the candy bar away. The child has a complete and total meltdown and starts screaming that he wants the candy. A frazzled mother with an out-of-control toddler tries to pay for the groceries and get out of the store without dying from embarrassment. You stand in line and watch the scene unfold and think to yourself, “My children will never act like that.”

Fast forward to today and you are now the young mother with the screaming toddler. The child you swore would never act like that because you were going to be a perfect parent with a perfect child is now yours. How are you going to deal with this situation?

First of all, realize that temper tantrums are a normal part of child development. It is extremely rare that a parent at one time or another hasn’t had to deal with a tired, out-of-control, screaming toddler in the midst of a meltdown. Typically, tantrum behaviors occur between the ages of two and four. They usually get fewer and farther between as your child matures because he learns to control his emotions. But some children are just wired to have more tantrums than others.

Tips for Parenting during a Tantrum

- **Learn the signs** of a tantrum and try to derail them before they start. Is your child over tired? Is he hungry? Is he bored? Are your expectations of his behavior age-appropriate? Is he protesting your strong reaction to his poor behavior? Do you typically give in to his demands? Avoid these situations when you can.
- **Stay cool and calm.** Recognize your child’s emotion, but don’t have a long discussion. For a very young child, always have some form of distraction to get him off of the tantrum track. Let him know in simple language what you expect from him. If he calms down, praise him and possibly reward him.
- If he is unable to calm himself, **don’t reward the tantrum** with a lot of attention. Instead, be a quiet presence. Hold him very firmly and lovingly explain “You are angry and have lost control. Mommy is holding you tightly because I love you, I want to help you, and you are going to be all right.” Scolding or shouting back will not work even though you may feel like having a tantrum yourself right then. Do not try to reason with him, just hold him and love him. Eventually your child will calm down or wear himself out.

Why Do Temper Tantrums Happen at These Ages?

There are two basic reasons temper tantrums happen at these ages. First, your two year old has an intense desire to do things for himself, but the desire is often greater than his ability. This is a child who thinks “I can do it myself” and when that doesn’t turn out to be true, he can become very frustrated. Often this frustration leads to a tantrum. Your child needs patience and love. Keep your arms open. Help redirect him to an activity that is appropriate for his age and praise him when he does it successfully.

The second, and probably more common, reason for tantrums is hearing the word “NO” just when your child has already made up his mind. He can’t process someone telling him what he can and cannot do. He wants to be a big boy, but his world reminds him how small he still is. He is also still learning to talk. He understands most of what he hears, but does not have the language to express his emotions. So, he begins a tantrum to force his will over yours. Think of your child’s tantrums as a giant call for help. He needs someone to keep him from falling apart.

How to Handle Tantrums

You may have heard the advice to ignore a tantrum and your child will stop. This advice is not always interpreted correctly. Ignoring a tantrum does not mean to leave your child to his own devices. Rather, it means to distance your own emotions from your child's when he is having a tantrum.

During a tantrum your child is out-of-control and he needs a strong person present to help him regain control. You cannot "handle" a tantrum; you can only support your child when he has them. Part of your child growing up is that he learns to "handle" his own emotions. Especially if the issue is a power struggle, your firm and loving approach should set your child's mind at ease that you are indeed in control.

Stop Tantrums Before They Start

- **Reward** good behavior
- **Allow** your child to make some small decisions
- **Give** 5-minute warnings before the end of an activity

Tantrums in Public Places

Tantrums in public places are probably one of the most embarrassing things that can happen to a parent. Often, your first thought is "What will people think?" But consider his feelings, too. He may be just as embarrassed to be out-of-control when people are watching. The only thing you can do is remove the child from the situation, to a restroom or to your vehicle, and react exactly the way you would if you were at home. If it is a power struggle, remember your authority is at stake. Do not give in to his demands in order to bribe him to stop the public tantrum – it will only lead to more bad behavior in the future.

Now What?

Most temper tantrums do not have lasting effects on your child. You may be exhausted long after your child has recovered and is a happy child again. However, once a tantrum is over, it is important not to hold a grudge. Make an effort to cuddle your child and make up by talking and praying together.

Resources

1. Lerner, Claire, and Sarah S MacLaughlin. "Toddler Tantrums 101: Why They Happen and What You Can Do." ZERO TO THREE, Zero To Three, 10 Apr. 2017, www.zerotothree.org/resources/1790-toddler-tantrums-101-why-they-happen-and-what-you-can-do. Accessed 12/10/2019
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