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## TEMPER TANTRUMS

### DEFINITION

A temper tantrum is an immature way of expressing anger. No matter how calm and gentle a parent you are, your child will probably throw some tantrums. Try to teach your child that temper tantrums don't work and that you don't change your mind because of them. By 3 years of age, you can begin to teach your child to verbalize his or her feelings ("You feel angry because..."). We need to teach children that anger is normal but that it must be channeled appropriately. By school age, temper tantrums should be rare. During adolescence, tantrums reappear, but your teenager can be reminded that blowing up creates a bad impression and that counting to 10 can help him or her regain control.

### RESPONSES TO TEMPER TANTRUMS

Overall, praise your child when he or she controls his or her temper, verbally expresses anger, and is cooperative. Be a good model by staying calm and not screaming or having adult tantrums. Avoid spanking for tantrums because it conveys to your child that you are out of control. Try using the following responses to the different type of temper tantrums.

1. **Support and help children having frustration or fatigue-related tantrums.** Children often have temper tantrums when they are frustrated with themselves. They may be frustrated because they can't put something together. Young children may be frustrated because their parents don't understand their speech. Older children may be frustrated with their ability to do their homework.

At these times, your child needs encouragement and a parent who listens. Put an arm around him/her and say something brief that shows understanding such as "I know it's hard, but you'll get better at it. Is there something I can do to help you?" Also give praise for not giving up. Some of these tantrums can be prevented by steering your child away from tasks that he/she can't do well.

Children tend to have more temper tantrums when they are tired (for example, when they've missed a nap) because they are less able to cope with frustrating situations. At these times put your child to bed. Hunger can contribute to temper tantrums. If you suspect this, give your child a snack. Temper tantrums also increase during sickness.

2. **Ignore attention-seeking or demanding-type tantrums.** Young children may throw temper tantrums to get their way. They may want to go with you rather than be left with a baby-sitter, want candy, want to empty a desk drawer, or want to go outside in bad weather. They don't accept rules for their safety. Tantrums for attention may include whining, crying, pounding the floor or wall, slamming a door, or breathe holding. As long as your child stays in one place and is not too disruptive, you can leave him/her alone.

If you recognize that a certain event is going to push your child over the edge, try to shift his/her attention to something else. However, don't give in to your child's demands. During the temper tantrum, if his/her behavior is harmless, ignore it completely. Once a tantrum has started, it rarely can be stopped.

Move away, even to a different room; then your child no longer has an audience. Do not try to reason with your child - it will only make the tantrum worse. Simply state, "I can see you're very angry. I

will leave you alone until you cool off. Let me know if you want to talk." Let your child regain control. After the tantrum, be friendly and try to return things to normal. You can prevent some of these tantrums by saying "no" less often.

**3. Physically move children having refusal-type tantrums.** If your child refuses something unimportant (such as a snack or lying down in bed), let it go before a tantrum begins. However, if your child must do something important, such as go to bed or to daycare, he/she should not be able to avoid it by having a tantrum. Some of these tantrums can be prevented by giving your child a 5-minute warning instead of asking him/her suddenly to stop what he/she is doing. Once a tantrum has begun, let your child have the tantrum for 2 or 3 minutes. Try to put his/her displeasure into words: "You want to play some more, but it is bedtime." Then take him/her to the intended destination (for example, the bed), helping him/her as much as is needed (including carrying).

**4. Use time-outs for disruptive-type tantrums.** Some temper tantrums are too disruptive for parents to ignore. On such occasions send or take your child to his/her room for 2 to 5 minutes. Examples of disruptive behavior include

- Clinging to you or following you around during the tantrum
- Hitting you
- Screaming and yelling for such a long time that it gets on your nerves
- Having a temper tantrum in a public place such as a restaurant or church (Move your child to another place for his/her time-out. The rights of other people need to be protected.)
- Throwing something or damaging property during a temper tantrum.

**5. Hold children having harmful or rage-type tantrums.** If your child is totally out of control and screaming wildly, consider holding them. The loss of control probably scares them. Also hold your child when he/she is having tantrums that carry a danger of self-injury (such as if he/she is violently throwing them self backward).

Take your child in your arms, tell him/her you know he/she is angry, and offer him/her your sense of control. Hold your child until you feel the body start to relax. This usually takes 1 to 3 minutes. Then let go. This comforting response is rarely needed after 3 years of age.

Some children won't want you to comfort them. Hold your child only if it helps. If your child says "go away", do so. After the tantrum subsides, your child will often want to be held briefly. This is a good way to get your child back into the family activities.

## CALL OUR OFFICE

### During regular hours if

- Your child has hurt him/herself or others during tantrums.
- The tantrums occur five or more times a day.
- The tantrums also occur in school.
- Your child has several other behavior problems.
- One of the parents has tantrums or screaming bouts and can't give them up.
- This approach does not bring improvement within 2 weeks.
- You have other questions or concerns.