

TIP SHEET

TACKLING TANTRUMS

Tantrums are intense emotional outbursts which are characteristic of the toddler stage (1 – 3 years old). However, older children (3 – 6) can throw tantrums as well. It is typical of a toddler to throw a tantrum and do one or more of the following: screaming, crying, kicking, hitting, throwing, name calling, head banging, and can even resemble a dying cockroach on the floor.

There is a big difference between a baby and a toddler. Whereas as a baby sees themselves as an attachment to the mother/father or carer, the toddler realises they are not attached, but rather their own separate entity with their own will. Toddlers are at the stage where they need to develop their independence and will often show this by exploring, testing and pushing the boundaries. This is appropriate behaviour for a toddler. It is important for toddlers to reach this emotional milestone without feeling ashamed of themselves (parents criticising them can lead to shame). However, parents need to set boundaries for their toddler (hop down from there, that's dangerous, stay close to me, be gentle) but they can also prevent some tantrums by giving their toddler some sense of independence. This can be achieved by providing your toddler with some choices (would you like the wear the pink dress or the red dress, would you like milk or water, would you like some help, would you like me to stay here with you or let you have some privacy whilst you go to the potty). The choices help the toddler feel empowered and more cooperative.

There are a number of reasons why toddlers throw tantrums:

1. They NEED something such as, food if they are hungry, water/milk if they are thirsty, comfort if they are in pain, sleep if they are tired, rest if they are over-stimulated, a new nappy if they are dirty/wet, interaction, touch and love if they are bored, scared, etc.
2. Parents/carers are setting boundaries (no, you can have one juice a day, you can only play if you are gentle, you need to stay strapped in the highchair) and the toddler has difficulty trying to accept that they cannot be independent about everything they want.
3. Toddlers often do not have the ability to identify, label and deal with a particular feeling or a number of feelings (jealousy of the new baby, frustration over learning a new skill such as a puzzle, fear of being abandoned, falling down the toilet, being eaten by a monster, continual rejection of being told no you can't....., etc.)
4. Parents/carers can create tantrums. For example, a child wants something such as a biscuit, getting out of a high chair, not getting into a car seat, being picked up, and the parent/carer says no for a number of times and then the child is enraged and throws a tantrum at which point the parent/carer gives in and the toddler gets what he wants. What he has learnt is that to get what he wants he has to be aggressive (throw a tantrum). In the future, to get what he wants he throws a tantrum because he knows that his parents/carers will just give in on the sixth "I want....."
5. Your toddler's emotional makeup. Children's temperament or personality differs. Some children are naturally aggressive, timid, more stubborn, energetic, calm, etc. Parents can help enormously as unlike IQ, which is innate, emotional intelligence is 50% innate and 50% learnt. So a parent of a timid child would help the child develop confidence (not rescuing but encouraging independence). A parent of an aggressive child would help their child be assertive to have their needs met.

Parents/carers often feel frustrated, embarrassed, and helpless and at loss as to what to do when their children throw a tantrum. Should I just leave her, intervene; punish her, hug her – its not an easy answer.

Below are some tips for dealing with tantrums.

1. If you can try to prevent the tantrum – feeding them regularly such as, six small meals a day, giving choices, putting them to bed when they are tired, insisting on quiet time and not over-stimulating, thinking ahead and predicting situations when there could be a potential tantrum, and following through with consequence and being consistent.
2. **Pick your fights!!** Give your child some choices where you can. Choices can be given not where safety (e.g., roads, water, electricity) and values (respect for others – not hitting, not biting, not snatching, etc.) are concerned, but they can be given with the things that bug you (what she wants to wear, what type of yoghurt, what book to read, what CD to listen to). Use statements where there is no choice (come here please, Be gentle, Use your manners please) and ask questions when there is a choice (would you like the strawberry yoghurt or the strawberry yoghurt, would you like a hand, would you like some help, would you like Mummy to stay here with you or wait outside the toilet door).
3. **Be emotionally in-tune with you child.** Ask yourself, what is happening here? How is my daughter/son feeling? If you do this regularly, then you may be able to prevent the tantrum because you know its time to leave the play date, have some quiet time as she needs a hug, cancel an appointment, give them a day off nursery school, feed them, put them to bed, etc.
4. Prevent getting into the behavioural pattern of rescuing or giving in once the tantrum has started. If you want to break this particular pattern, you will have to ignore the demands of your child and prevent yourself from rescuing. Manage your self-talk and use the affirmation process if the parent/carer is having difficulty getting them out of the habit of rescuing. *"I follow through on my fair and compassionate consequences with the children."*

Tackling Tantrums... cont'd

5. Help your child label their feelings when they show feelings such as, *are you getting frustrated with that activity, are you feeling jealous of your new baby sister, mummy is grumpy sometimes in the morning when she is hungry, are you feeling grumpy too because your hungry?*
6. Help your child to manage their feelings. If they get aggressive when they are throwing a tantrum, teach them techniques to calm down and talk about what they want rather than being physical such as, the turtle and check yourself technique. If they get upset or scared, give them something to comfort themselves such as a blanket, their favourite toy, stuffed animal, doll, pacifier, etc. It is important not to isolate your child in this situation emotionally or physically such as ignoring them or putting them in their room as it will only exacerbate the tantrum. Try and find a safe place and keep an eye on them. If the tantrum is already intense, time out won't improve it so avoid it. Sometimes children get scared when throwing a tantrum because of disapproval from the parent or because they are scared of the intense feelings they are experiencing.
7. Get down at their level when you talk to them and look them in the eye. Show them respect just as you would like respect when you are feeling something. When you acknowledge their feelings, they will more than likely be in a better position to solve the problem in a less emotional way.
8. Tantrums indicate that they feel safe or comfortable emotionally with someone, so it can measure the level of intimacy between you. Next time your child has a tantrum remind yourself that you are the chosen one!
9. Manage your self-talk (I am patient, I am the adult in the relationship, What is happening here). Empathise. Look at your options for directing behaviour to prevent or diffuse the tantrum such as consequences, (When you can talk to me in normal voice I will pick you up, When you calm down we can sit and talk about it, When you use nice words with Daddy we can read the book).
10. Make some decisions (in the family conference for example) about your family rules for expressing emotion – is your child allowed to shout when angry, cry when sad, or whine when grumpy.
11. Older children throw tantrums as well for similar reasons but they are in a better situation to deal with them usually because their language is more developed.
12. Sometimes children throw tantrums and they are associated with a medical condition such as diabetes. However, tantrums alone are not a reason to believe there is something medically wrong. Usually there are other signs, such as frequent urination and thirst for diabetes.

Recommended Children's Books

First Experience Series (Fred Rogers, Putman)

The Berenstain Bears, My Trusty Car Seat, Pacifier Days, My Potty and I, My New Bed (Stan and Jan Bernstein (Random House)

I want my Potty (part of a Collins Picture Lions Book series for toddlers)

Be gentle (Virginia Miller)

I will not ever Never eat a tomato (Lauren Child)

I was so mad Mercer Mayer Little Critter Series (Mercer Mayer)