



Pediatric Clinic  
PATIENT EDUCATION HANDOUTS

## Temper Tantrums

### *What is a temper tantrum?*

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 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. By adolescence, your teenager can be reminded that blowing up creates a bad impression and that counting to 10 can help him regain control.

### *What should I do when my child has a tantrum?*

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

- 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 inability to do their homework. At these times your child needs encouragement and a parent who listens. Put an arm around him and say something 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 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.
- 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 the baby sitter, want candy, want to empty a desk drawer, or want to go outside in bad weather. Tantrums for attention may include whining, crying, pounding or hitting the floor

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Written by B.D. Schmitt, M.D., author of "Your Child's Health," Bantam Books.

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or door, slamming a door, or breath-holding. As long as your child stays in one place and is not too disruptive, you can leave him alone. If you recognize that a certain event is going to push your child over the edge, try to shift his attention to something else. However, don't give in to your child's demands. During the temper tantrum, if his 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. Don't try to reason with your child. Simply state, "I can see you're very angry. I'll 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 or avoidance-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 day care, he 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 suddenly to stop what he is doing. Once a tantrum has begun, let your child have the tantrum for 2 or 3 minutes. Try to put his displeasure into words: "You want to play some more, but it's bedtime." Then take him to the intended destination (for example, the bed), helping him as much as is needed (including carrying).
4. **Use time-outs for disruptive-type tantrums.** Some temper tantrums are too disruptive or aggressive for parents to ignore. On such occasions send or take your child to his room for 2 to 5 minutes. Examples of disruptive behavior include:
  - Clinging to you or following you around during the tantrum.
  - Hitting you.
  - Screaming or 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 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 him. His loss of control probably scares him. Also hold your child when he is having tantrums that carry a danger of self-injury (such as if he is violently throwing himself backward). Take your child in your arms, tell him you know he is angry, and offer him your sense of control. Hold him until you feel his body start to relax. This usually takes 1 to 3 minutes. Then let him 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 him back into the family activities.

***When should I call my child's healthcare provider?***

Call during office hours if:

Your child has hurt himself or others during tantrums.

The tantrums occur five or more times per 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.

**Special Instructions:**