

Toddlers & Tantrums: Why Tantrums Happen and How to Reduce Them

Maybe you've been there – standing in the checkout line at the grocery store when your two-year-old decides to throw a major tantrum. Is this normal? How should you respond? Is there anything you can do to prevent these major meltdowns in the future? Here is Marti's advice to help you understand and respond effectively to tantrums:

I. Are tantrums normal and, if so, why?

- Tantrums are common in young children, especially about 18 months to three years of age. At those ages, children know what they want but don't yet have the language to express themselves well. They also have not yet developed the ability to wait patiently for things or to calm themselves down when they begin to feel upset.
- Tantrums happen most often when children feel powerless over their circumstances and when they are overtired and/or over-stimulated. So it's no surprise that tantrums often happen in public when a parent's attention is divided and there is a lot of stimulation and a lot of waiting.
- A child who has frequent tantrums beyond the toddler period may do so because of a developmental problem and/or difficult circumstances at home or school. It is important to seek professional help if tantrums are interfering with a child's ability to learn, play and build positive relationships with others.

II. Tips for handling and preventing tantrums

- Make sure your child is fed and well-rested before a difficult outing
- Be clear about expectations and consequences
Frame these in positive terms. For example, "You will need to sit still in the grocery cart and use an inside voice. If you do that while I pick out our food for dinner, you may choose a treat to have in the car on the way home." Or instead of a treat, you might say, "We'll go play at the park when we get home," or some other favorite activity.
- Offer choices within limits
Children feel calmer and happier when they have a voice in decisions. For example, your child could choose whether to bring a stuffed animal or a favorite book along on an outing. Or you could let your child participate in shopping by choosing between green beans and broccoli for dinner or between peaches and strawberries for dessert.
- Catch your child being good
Notice when your child is meeting your expectations and comment, "You are being so patient and quiet while I shop. We're going to have a lot of fun playing together when we get home!"

- If your child does have a tantrum, counter that with a calm response
The temptation is to rise to the child's level of intensity, but that only escalates the tantrum. Instead, speak in a very soft voice in your child's ear, acknowledge his or her feelings (e.g., "You're tired of waiting for Mommy to finish shopping"), and suggest, "Let's take three big breaths together so we can calm down and finish. Then we can go home and have a good time together."

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