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PARENTING WITH CONFIDENCE



# tantrums

A tantrum is a young child's way of physically expressing feelings such as anger, frustration, hurt and being upset. The tantrum may include crying, screaming, punching and kicking. Temper tantrums are a normal part of the development of a young child. There are triggers that can make tantrums more likely including the child feeling stressed, hungry, tired, frustrated or overstimulated.

It is important for adults to assist a child to come out of a tantrum and regain control of their own feelings until they can do this themselves.

**A normal part of child development** Young children are emotional beings and act out their feelings through their behaviour. Young children do not have the cognitive abilities to plan their tantrums or use them to upset parents. Tantrums are simply a physical expression of the child's feelings. In most cases, the tantrum burns out after five or so minutes. Tantrums tend to occur when young children do not have the language to express how they feel or the ability to handle their feelings without adult assistance.

This often occurs between the ages of 18 months and four years, but each child is different. Some children don't have tantrums at all. Tantrums tend to become less frequent as the child learns more about themselves and their emotions. Young children need adults to assist them to come out of the tantrum. The older child learns how to reduce their own heightened emotional state without adult assistance.

## Signs

Tantrums differ from one child to the next but are usually a physical expression of a feeling. Some signs of tantrums include:

- Crying
- Screaming
- Foot stamping, falling down, flailing, punching or kicking
- Going limp like a rag doll
- Throwing or breaking things
- Breath holding
- Head banging.

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## Triggers

It is important to remember that tantrums are a normal part of child development. Children who have tantrums are not 'bad'. They are just expressing their feelings. However, certain factors make temper tantrums more likely – the child may be feeling:

- Stressed
- Hungry
- Tired
- Overstimulated – for example, by loud or noisy environments where there is a lot going on
- Frustrated – especially about not being understood or not having enough language skills to communicate needs
- Physically ill
- Upset – for example, because a parent has reacted angrily or laughed at the child
- Confused – for example, by inconsistent parenting or caregivers reacting differently to the tantrum in different circumstances.

## Tips to reduce tantrums

General suggestions include:

- Spend time together doing enjoyable things when your child is calm.
- Make sure your child gets enough rest and sleep, regular meals and healthy snacks and drinks.
- Use distraction whenever possible – this is particularly effective for younger children who have short attention spans.
- Find ways to help your child communicate – for example, encourage them to point at things. Two year olds speak only about 50 words. Lack of communication skills is thought to be a trigger for tantrums in younger children.
- Talk and read to your child as much as possible – it may help with their speech development and communication skills.
- Allow your child control over safe things – for example, let them choose which fruit to have at snack time or which toy to take to bed. This gives them a feeling of independence and control over one aspect of their world.
- Keep your parenting consistent – for example, don't change what you expect as reasonable behaviour just because you feel tired and it seems easier to give in. It's not easier in the long run. Compliment your child when they are behaving well.

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