

Children and Tantrums: Why They Do It. How to Get Through It.

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All children tantrum. Some children are better at it than others. All parents respond to tantrumming. Some responses are more useful than others. Some responses tend to reinforce the tantrums. Other responses are neutral. The best responses help the child understand and learn to manage emotional upset.

Before I go any farther, I want to state that you cannot judge a parent by a child's tantrums. Some children are more tightly wound than others; some family situations are more difficult to manage. All families have bad days. So Judge not, including yourself, based on how loudly, how often, or how publicly a child tantrums.

Why They Do It

Children tantrum for three basic reasons: To communicate, to gain control, or to release emotional energy.

First of all, tantrumming is a way to communicate. Children were infants not all that long ago. How do infants communicate? Through pure emotional response. They cry, they smile, they scream, they giggle. Through these reactions a parent learns how the child is feeling, what she needs, what she likes and dislikes. As they develop into toddlers, children learn gestures and then words to enhance their communication skills. They learn to get across the finer points. But when stressed, children regress. They lose track of their language skills and fall back into pure emotional expression to let you know what they want and need.

The second reason children tantrum is to gain control, to get what they want. This is the best understood reason for tantrumming, and many people assume it is the only or the primary reason for tantrumming in children. Gaining control is a powerful reason for tantrumming and when it works, Wow, what a powerful tool! When a child looks headed for a tantrum and it's his will against yours you need to make a quick decision. Is this worth going to the mat for? Take a mental survey of all relevant information. What is the child trying to communicate? Does he have a point? Is there room for compromise? If so it's fine to back peddle, admit your mistake, see if you can work out a solution. Your statement to your child will be something like this:

"You're right, I did say you could have the green cup next time. I'll get it for you."

"I said no chips but I forgot It's already past your lunch time and we won't be home for half an hour. I can see you are too hungry to wait."

But if this is time to hold the line then do it. State the limit in a calm, natural voice and do not be swayed by the storm. You can be as mad as you need to be. There are times when you need to stick to 'no' and the child needs to learn that tantrumming will not change the outcome.

The third reason children tantrum is to discharge emotional energy. Emotions are physical reaction in the body. We call them feelings because we feel them. We experience a tensing or relaxing of muscles, a sensation of lightness or heaviness. The nervous system readies for action, readies to respond to perceived threat or opportunity. The stronger the feeling, the stronger the need for physical release. Laughing, crying, and tantrumming are all physical releases of emotional energy. Some children tantrum more because they feel things more intensely or they have less control over the magnitude and direction of the physical response.

How to Get Through It

Tantrums are difficult to manage because they play into our own stuff. They make us feel out of control. They trigger all our insecurities as parents (If I were a better parent I would know what to do, my child wouldn't tantrum). For this reason, parents (I am no exception) sometimes become angry and punitive during tantrums. While this is understandable, it is not usually helpful and often prolongs the tantrum.

The message you want to give your child during a tantrum is this I am here, I will not desert you. Neither will I be drawn into this drama or allow it to influence my decision-making. To assist a child who is tantrumming to communicate, let the child know that the message has gotten through, for example, "You are so mad at me. You didn't want me to wash blankie. Now it doesn't smell right." When the main reason for the tantrum is to communicate, a little empathy can go a long way.

So what to do during a tantrum? Address all three needs. First let the child know s/he has communicated with you. This is not the time to try to get him to use his words. Just let the child know that you see how she or he is feeling and you know (if you do) what it is s/he wants. Simple statements like this are helpful:

"You're really sad. You don't want mommy to go out. You want mommy to stay right here."

"You are so mad. You want a cookie right now."

Sometimes this is enough and the tantrum will be averted.

Second, let the child know you will not change your mind because of the tantrum. Do not negotiate, do not explain, just set the limit and hold it. At the same time accept and name the emotion being expressed. Statements like this one are useful:

"You can be as mad as you need to be but the answer is still No."

"I see how sad you are that we can't stay longer but we are leaving now."

Third, accept the need for physical release. Set limits so it does not create safety hazards or interfere with other people unduly.

"I see that you are mad but you may not yell at the table. It makes it hard for everyone to eat. You will need to leave the table until you calm down."

"I know you are mad but there is no screaming in the car. If you can't calm down I will have to pull over until you stop."

For some children a time out in another room is helpful to complete the tantrum and return to a calm state. This is especially true if the child is over stimulated. For other children separation during a tantrum causes heightened anxiety and serves to draw the tantrum out. I don't like to give children the message that they are only acceptable when happy. But if a time out is a useful tool for managing the overwhelm that comes with a tantrum, by all means use it.

Depending on the source and the meaning of the tantrum the child may recover quickly and move on or need some reassurance and assistance. Some children like to be wrapped tightly in a blanket and held while they recover. Others just may want a few minutes of quiet, a brief hug or words of comfort.

When the tantrumming becomes chronic

Some tantrumming is inevitable but when it becomes chronic it can take over family life and make everyone miserable. When that happens ask yourself the following questions. Understanding the reason for the tantrums can lead to the solution.

Is my child getting enough sleep? Sleep deprivation makes everything harder. Pain is felt more acutely. Focus is hard to maintain. Even minor problems loom large. If your child is not getting the recommended amount of sleep (insert numbers here) try adjusting your day and evening routines to lengthen the amount of sleep everyone is getting. That may go a long way toward solving the problem.

Is my child under stress? Starting or changing schools, moving, parental divorce, new siblings, and traveling are all very stressful for children. While many cannot

be avoided try to avoid piling them on top of one another. Expect some regression. Keep daily routines as routine as possible. Offer extra comfort. Remove the stressors that can be removed. With patience and understanding this too will pass.

Is it time to ask for help? If the tantrumming is more than you can manage, if it goes on for a long time, if you child is able to communicate unhappiness but not much more, it might be time to seek out professional help.

About the Author

Katrinca Ford, MS, MFT, is a marriage and family therapist in California who specializes in work with young children and families. She sees children, adults and families in her private practice offices in San Ramon and Oakland. Ms Ford has over 30 years of experience working with children in a variety of settings. Much of Ms Ford's understanding of children developed during her many years as a preschool teacher. She is co-founder of the Woolsey Children School in Berkeley and continues to serve as behavioral/therapeutic consultant to the school staff. Ms Ford earned her BA in human development and her Masters in counseling psychology from Cal State Hayward (now East Bay).