



Cultivating Child Development Series

Handling children's temper tantrum

How to handle children's temper tantrum?

The period from 2 years to 4 years old is an important phase of life. Children begin to separate from you and are eager to seek out more independence and control over their world. Their logic is immature and their reasoning is developing. When children are having a hard time coping with frustrations or disappointments, they throw temper tantrums. They might scream, lie on the floor to cry or even hit themselves or others. They are not purposefully misbehaving; they are just reacting to their intense emotions, which cause them to lose control.

Each child is unique. Families have different acceptance and ways to handle the behaviour of their children. In order to manage your child, it may be useful to think about the following questions:

- What triggers your child to throw temper? What do these things have in common?
- How do you respond when your child is being defiant?
- What works? What doesn't?



The followings are key points to remember and strategies to follow when handling young child:

- **Establish a loving, strong parent-child relationship.** This is the most important piece of advice because it builds the foundation for your child's acceptance of your future guidance. It does not occur naturally and cannot be established overnight. It is nurtured through interaction between you and the child through play, exploration and spending quality time together.
- **Stay calm and be a role model.** Parents should try to calm down and be rational when handling meltdown of their children. Disappointment and embarrassment resulting from misbehaviour of the child can lead to parents losing control over their own emotions. Parents need to recognize their own cues and be prepared to calm down themselves before handling their children. Bring the child to a quieter place with less people, such as the staircase or washroom in a mall, can help the child calm down.
- **Validate your child's feelings.** Describing and empathizing your children's feeling can help to calm them down. For example, you can say "I know you are mad when you are not allowed to go into the toy store, but you cannot hit yourself or the others." Be clear and firm in your tone but not angry. Firmly hold on to his arm to stop him from further acting out. You need to show them that feeling disappointed or mad is acceptable, but acting out to hurt themselves or the others is not.
- **Avoid accidentally rewarding tantrums.** Distraction is a powerful way to dissolve a meltdown. For example, the child is crying and making a fuss because you don't buy him candies. In order to distract him, you buy him stickers instead. The stickers become the secondary gain from his temper tantrum. This would only perpetuate his behaviour in the long run rather than diminish it. The key to using distraction is to predetermine effective distractors based on child's likes and dislikes, yet avoiding secondary gains.



- **Offer clear instructions and appropriate limits.** Prepare the child using simple direct instructions. For example, “We have to go home after one more slide.” Or, you can provide the child with visual cues such as timer. Young children have not yet developed concept of time. The beep sound when time is up can signal the child to change task. Better still, you can practice using a timer with child at home so that he becomes familiar with the concept. Getting him to be the one who set the timer and press the initiation button can be a good motivation for him to abide.
- **Enforce the limit calmly.** If the child refuses to comply, calmly facilitate the necessary next step. For example, “you can come down from the slide, or I can come to fetch you.” Assertively carry him away from the slide and calmly tell him “I know that you hate to leave, but we do need to go home now because it is late.” Minimize further negotiation.
- **Be assertive.** If you give in to tantrums, your child learns that if he pushes hard enough, he will get what he wants. This will also make it more difficult the next time you try to enforce a limit.
- **Offer time-out.** When emotions are escalating, a break for both parent and child can be a healthier solution than ongoing battle. When done calmly and lovingly, time-out can be an important opportunity to provide both child and parent a chance to regain control, and to then come back together to solve problem.
- ✧ **Create a special safe space** e.g. cosy corner or peace place. Parents will talk with child in advance about the purpose of this safe space—that is where people go when they are losing control and need a break. Children under 4 years old have limited ability to reflect on their own actions and behaviour. This means the goal is not self-reflection, but to provide a quiet place where children can move from a state of high agitation and upset to a sense of calm.



- ✧ **Choose a time duration best suited to your child.** End time-out when the child is calm or after the timer beeps (usually 3-5min). At this point, he might still be upset, but if he is no longer out of control and is willing to accept being comforted, you can help him move on. When your child is very angry, a strong cuddle with a pillow or a teddy bear might help. Allow him to cuddle as tightly as he can to vent his emotion. This teaches your child to express strong feelings in healthy, non-hurtful ways. If your child is old enough, you can teach him to use words to express himself. Words like “angry”, “upset” and “don’t like” can be useful.

While each child is born with a different temperament, the development of self-control and emotional regulation are experience-driven processes that are nurtured through day-to-day interaction with caregiver, family and friends. Being able to manage and cope with strong feelings is a critical skill for lifelong success, so don’t fear these moments. Instead, see them as great opportunities for teaching your child an essential life skill.

References and further reading:

1. Family Health Service, Department of Health - Child Health:
http://www.fhs.gov.hk/english/health_info/class_life/child/child.html
2. Zero to Three Parenting:
<https://www.zerotothree.org/parenting>
3. Raising Children.net.au
<https://raisingchildren.net.au/toddlers/behaviour/crying-tantrums/tantrums>



Child Assessment Service, Department of Health
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