



Tantrums

It's something we've all seen or experienced. A loud and distressed toddler throwing a tantrum right there in the middle of the grocery aisle at your local supermarket. Somewhere nearby you will find an embarrassed Mum or Dad doing their best to either ignore the child or convince them to stop.

The fact is, tantrums are to be expected in childhood, particularly in 2-year-olds, and the first time a child throws a tantrum can be quite hard on parents, especially if there are visitors present or you are out in public.

So what's the reason behind it all?

Sometimes there are no obvious clues as to why a toddler will suddenly throw a tantrum, but most often it is when they are feeling frustrated or angry. Like adults, toddlers can become frustrated when they are unable to manage a difficult task or things just don't go the way they expect. Young children may also not yet know enough words to say exactly what it is they want, become overtired, or not like being told *No*.

Tantrums usually begin at about 12 months of age and are less common in 3 and 4-year olds as children begin to learn other ways to solve problems. Of course, children being the individuals that they are, some will have a naturally quiet and easy-going nature and may rarely have tantrums, whereas others with quick tempers may have frequent tantrums and will need their parent's help to grow out of the behaviour.

But while tantrums often appear as a highly visible form of disruptive behaviour, they present us with the important opportunity to help teach our children how to manage frustration and anger. Knowing how to deal with the inevitable frustrations of life and possessing the ability to express anger in appropriate ways are powerful tools for a successful adulthood.

A tantrum may last as short as 20 seconds or go on for hours. It may include crying, screaming, stamping feet and rolling around on the floor. Sometimes it will also involve the rather frightening sight of a child holding their breath, although all children will eventually take a gasp of air. The challenge for parents is to deal with tantrums as soon they first occur and to teach your child to calm down quickly, thus reducing the distress on both yourselves and your child.

One of the best places to start tackling tantrums is by helping reduce the chances of them occurring at all. Where practical, put away items in your house that you do not want your child to touch. This avoids you having to say *No* too often. Provide a predictable environment for your child — let them know throughout the day what you are doing and what is going to happen. It is also a good idea to have a few simple and realistic rules and to keep to a routine for your child's meal and sleep times.

Managing tantrums once they occur may involve ignoring your child and walking away if it is safe to do so until the tantrum stops and praising them for doing so.

While this approach is often effective for toddlers under two years of age, it is more difficult when other children or visitors are present.

In the case of older toddlers it is probably better to give them clear instructions — *Christopher, stop screaming right now and speak in a nice voice* — and back that up with a consequence such as Time-out. When using Time-out make sure your child is taken away from the situation where the tantrum began into an uninteresting but safe room to be quiet for a minute. You may need to repeat the use of Time-out a number of times before your child learns to manage their frustration.

Tackling tantrums may take a few weeks of concerted effort and consistent application of Time-out and other strategies. To help you see if progress is being made try to jot down each time you use Time-out and how long it takes. After a week, the tantrums should be less frequent, and you will be well on your way toward helping your child learn some important new social skills.

PARENTING TIP:

Tantrums in public make it difficult to use strategies as ignoring or Time-out. Instead, find a safe quiet place to sit with your child such as a park bench or your car and tell them they must sit quietly. Wait beside them (without talking) until they have been quiet for about 30 seconds before going on. If this is unsuccessful, you will probably have to abandon your trip to take them home for immediate Time-out. You can always try again next time.