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## Temper Tantrums: Guidelines for Parents

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Every teacher of young children and every new parent can expect to witness some temper tantrums in children from age 1–4 years. On average, temper tantrums are equally common in boys and girls, and more than half of young children will have one or more per week.

At home, there are predictable situations that can be expected to trigger temper tantrums, such as bedtime, supertime, getting up, getting dressed, bath time, watching TV, parent talking on the phone, visitors at the house, family visiting another house, car rides, public places, family activities involving siblings, interactions with peers, and playtime. Other settings include transitions between activities, on the school bus, getting ready to work, interactions with other children, directives from the teacher, group activities, answering questions in class, individual seat work, and the playground.

### Characteristics of Temper Tantrums

All young children from time to time will whine, complain, resist, cling, argue, hit, shout, run, and defy their teachers and parents. Temper tantrums, although normal, can become upsetting to teachers and parents because they are embarrassing, challenging, and difficult to manage. On the other hand, temper tantrums can become special problems when they occur with greater frequency, intensity, and duration than is typical for the age of the child.

There are nine different types of temperaments in children:

- Hyperactive temperament predisposes the child to respond with fine- or gross-motor activity.
- Distractible temperament predisposes the child to pay more attention to his or her surroundings than to the caregiver.
- High intensity level temperament moves the child to yell, scream, or hit hard when feeling threatened.
- Irregular temperament moves the child to escape the source of stress by needing to eat, drink, sleep, or use the bathroom at irregular times when he or she does not really have the need.
- Negative persistent temperament is seen when the child seems stuck in his or her whining and complaining.
- Low sensory threshold temperament is evident when the child complains about tight clothes and people staring and refuses to be touched by others.
- Initial withdrawal temperament is found when children get clingy, shy, and

- unresponsive in new situations and around unfamiliar people.
- Poor adaptability temperament shows itself when children resist, shut down, and become passive-aggressive when asked to change activities.
- Negative mood temperament is found when children appear lethargic, sad, and lack the energy to perform a task.

## **Developmental Issues**

At about age 1 1/2 some children will start throwing temper tantrums. These bouts of temper tantrums can last until approximately age 4. Some call this stage the terrible twos and others call it first adolescence because the struggle for independence is similar to what is seen during adolescence. Regardless of what the stage is called, there is a normal developmental course for temper tantrums.

*One-and-a-half through 2 years old.* Children during this stage will test the limits. They want to see how far they can go before a parent or teacher stops their behavior. At age 2 children are very egocentric and cannot see another person's point of view. They want independence and self-control to explore their environment. When children cannot reach a goal, they show frustration by crying, arguing, yelling, or hitting. When children's need for independence collides with the parents' and teachers' needs for safety and conformity, the conditions are perfect for a power struggle and a temper tantrum. The temper tantrum is designed to get the teacher or parent to desist in their demands or give them whatever they want. Many times children stop the temper tantrum only when they get what is desired. What is most upsetting to caregivers is that it is virtually impossible to reason with children who are having a temper tantrum, and arguing and cajoling in response to a temper tantrum only escalates the problem.

*Three-year-olds.* By age 3 many children are less impulsive and can use language to express their needs. Tantrums at this age are often less frequent and less severe. Nevertheless, some preschoolers have learned that a temper tantrum is a good way to get what they want.

*Four-year-olds.* Most children have the necessary motor and physical skills to meet many of their own needs without relying so much on an adult. At this age, children also have better language that allows them to express their anger and to problem-solve and compromise. Despite these improved skills, even kindergarten-age and school-age children can still have temper tantrums when they are faced with demanding academic tasks and new interpersonal situations in school.

## **Prevention for Parents and Teachers**

It is much easier to prevent temper tantrums than it is to manage them once they have erupted. Here are some tips for preventing temper tantrums and some things you can say:

- Reward children for positive attention rather than negative attention. During situations when they are prone to temper tantrums, catch them when they are being good and say such things as, "Nice job sharing with your friend."

- Do not ask children to do something when they must do what you ask. Do not ask, “Would you like to eat now?” Say, “It’s suppertime now.”
- Give children control over little things whenever possible by giving choices. A little bit of power given to the child can stave off the big power struggles later. “Which do you want to do first, brush your teeth or put on your pajamas?”
- Keep off-limit objects out of sight and therefore out of mind. In an art activity keep the scissors out of reach if children are not ready to use them safely.
- Distract children by redirection to another activity when they tantrum over something they should not do or cannot have. Say, “Let’s read a book together.”
- Change environments, thus removing the child from the source of the temper tantrum. Say, “Let’s go for a walk.”
- Choose your battles. Teach children how to make a request without a temper tantrum and then honor the request. Say, “Try asking for that toy nicely and I’ll get it for you.”
- Make sure that children are well rested and fed in situations in which a temper tantrum is a likely possibility. Say, “Supper is almost ready, here’s a cracker for now.”
- Avoid boredom. Say, “You have been working for a long time. Let’s take a break and do something fun.”
- Create a safe environment that children can explore without getting into trouble. Childproof your home or classroom so children can explore safely.
- Increase your tolerance level. Are you available to meet the child’s reasonable needs? Evaluate how many times you say, “No.” Avoid fighting over minor things.
- Establish routines and traditions that add structure. For teachers, start class with a sharing time and opportunity for interaction.
- Signal children before you reach the end of an activity so that they can get prepared for the transition. Say, “When the timer goes off 5 minutes from now it will be time to turn off the TV and go to bed.”
- When visiting new places or unfamiliar people explain to the child beforehand what to expect. Say, “Stay with your assigned buddy in the museum.”
- Provide pre-academic, behavioral, and social challenges that are at the child’s developmental level so that the child does not become frustrated.
- Keep a sense of humor to divert the child’s attention and surprise the child out of the tantrum.

### **Intervention for Parents and Teachers**

There are a number of ways to handle a temper tantrum. Strategies include the following:

- Remain calm and do not argue with the child. Before you manage the child, you must manage your own behavior. Spanking or yelling at the child will make the tantrum worse.
- Think before you act. Count to 10 and then think about the source of the

child's frustration, this child's characteristic temperamental response to stress (hyperactivity, distractibility, moodiness), and the predictable steps in the escalation of the temper tantrum.

- Try to intervene before the child is out of control. Get down at the child's eye level and say, "You are starting to get revved up, slow down." Now you have several choices of intervention.
- You can positively distract the child by getting the child focused on something else that is an acceptable activity. For example, you might remove the unsafe item and replace with an age-appropriate toy.
- You can place the child in time away. Time away is a quiet place where the child goes to calm down, think about what he or she needs to do, and, with your help, make a plan to change the behavior.
- You can ignore the tantrum if it is being thrown to get your attention. Once the child calms down, give the attention that is desired.
- Hold the child who is out of control and is going to hurt himself or herself or someone else. Let the child know that you will let him or her go as soon as he or she calms down. Reassure the child that everything will be all right, and help the child calm down. Parents may need to hug their child who is crying, and say they will always love him or her no matter what, but that the behavior has to change. This reassurance can be comforting for a child who may be afraid because he or she lost control.
- If the child has escalated the tantrum to the point where you are not able to intervene in the ways described above, then you may need to direct the child to time-out (see "Resources"). If you are in a public place, carry your child outside or to the car. Tell the child that you will go home unless he or she calms down. In school warn the child up to three times that it is necessary to calm down and give a reminder of the rule. If the child refuses to comply, then place him or her in time-out for no more than 1 minute for each year of age.
- Talk with the child after the child has calmed down. When the child stops crying, talk about the frustration the child has experienced. Try to help solve the problem if possible. For the future, teach the child new skills to help avoid temper tantrums such as how to ask appropriately for help and how to signal a parent or teacher that the he or she knows they need to go to "time away" to "stop, think, and make a plan." Teach the child how to try a more successful way of interacting with a peer or sibling, how to express his or her feelings with words and recognize the feelings of others without hitting and screaming.

### **Post-Tantrum Management**

- Never, under any circumstances, give in to a tantrum. That response will only increase the number and frequency of the tantrums.
- Explain to the child that there are better ways to get what he or she wants.
- Do not reward the child after a tantrum for calming down. Some children will learn that a temper tantrum is a good way to get a treat later.
- Never let the temper tantrum interfere with your otherwise positive relationship with the child.

- Teach the child that anger is a feeling that we all have and then teach her ways to express anger constructively.

### **When to Get Help**

*For parents.* If, despite the use of these interventions, the tantrums are increasing in frequency, intensity, or duration, consult your child's doctor. You should also consult your child's doctor if the child is self-injurious, hurtful to others, depressed, showing signs of low self-esteem, or is overly dependent on a parent or teacher for support. Your pediatrician or family physician can check for hearing or vision problems, chronic illness, or conditions such as Asperger's syndrome, language delays, or a learning disability, which may be contributing to your child's increasing temper tantrums. Your physician can also direct you to a mental health professional who can provide assistance for you and your child.

### **Resources**

- Agassi, M. (2000). *Hands are not for hitting*. Minneapolis: Free Spirit. ISBN: 1575421127.
- Greene, R. W. (1998). *The explosive child*. New York: Harper Collins. ASIN: 0060175346.
- MacKenzie, R. (2001). *Setting limits with your strongwilled child*. New York: Prima. ISBN: 0761521364.
- Nelson, J. (1999). *Positive time-out and over 50 ways to avoid power struggles in the home and the classroom*. New York: Prima. ISBN: 0761521755.
- Reichenberg-Ullman, J., & Ullman, R. (1999). *Rage-free kids*. New York: Prima. ASIN: 0761520279.

### **Website**

Cambridge Center for Behavioral Studies— [www.behavior.org](http://www.behavior.org) (See Effective Parenting)

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