

Taming Tantrums and Toddler Meltdowns

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Why do toddlers have meltdowns (tantrums or tears)

Life can be hard for a toddler, and sometimes things happen that make them so sad, or so mad, or so scared that they have an emotional meltdown where they are completely overwhelmed by their feelings. Here are some of the reasons toddlers melt down:

1. Rules: They want to do something that is not allowed, and are angry that you are blocking them.
2. Impossibilities: They want something that's not *possible*, and can't understand when you explain.
3. Lack of control: They have little choice about what they do, where they go, or when things happen.
4. Frustration: They want to be able to do something that they know other people can do, but they're just not yet capable of. They try and try and try, and then they cry.
5. Can't communicate: They need or want something and don't have the words to tell you what it is.
6. Attention: If they've asked repeatedly for your attention, and haven't gotten it, they may melt down.
7. Separation: They count on you for everything, so it's hard when you're not there.
8. Physical needs: They're tired, hungry, thirsty, sick, cold, hot, or overstimulated. Or their normal routine has changed. These factors turn a minor upset into an overwhelming one.
9. Can't regulate: The part of their brain that will someday help them regulate emotion is still developing. Just because you say "it's not worth getting upset over this" doesn't mean they can stop being upset.

Preventing Meltdowns

Even if you were the perfect parent, and did absolutely everything right, there would still be times when your child would melt down!! But there are some ways that we can reduce the incidence:

- Meet physical needs: Your child is less likely to melt down if he is rested, fed, and comfortable.
- Be aware of your child's capacity for stimulation: Children all have a different threshold where they overload. Some children are particularly sensitive to noise, others to bright lights, others to crowds. When planning your child's activities, think about how much they can manage at a time.
- Be aware of triggers: Minimize things you know upset your child. (I am not suggesting you walk on eggshells, trying desperately to never upset your child! But, pick your battles. If something is necessary for them to adapt to, then we do it and coach them through. But, if it's not necessary, skip it.)
- Set expectations: Tell them ahead of time what to expect, what behavior you're expecting of them, and what the consequences will be if they can't behave that way. (Over time, it's helpful to have a short-hand for this... in our family, we had "theatre rules" which also apply for meetings, church, etc. and "restaurant rules" which also apply to meals at friend's houses and "playground rules.")
- Give choices where you can. (But don't offer choices in the middle of a tantrum; that's overwhelming!)
- Set limits and follow them consistently: We don't always give children what they want, and we don't want them to think they're the boss of the family. When you set limits, you will face the occasional tantrum, but over time – with consistent enforcement, the child learns and respects the family limits, and will have fewer meltdowns than the child who never knows if or when a rule will be enforced.
- Watch for early cues: Notice when your child is reaching the end of her rope. Let her know that you've noticed – that helps her learn to recognize it for herself. Try distraction or a change of scenery.
- Talk about meltdowns when they're NOT having one. Ask your child to let you know when they have

one coming on. (Note: it will be a while before they're capable of that!) Praise your child when they've done a good job of calming themselves down – we want to reinforce their efforts at self-regulation.

- Talk about and model, positive ways to manage feelings. Use Emotion Coaching to build emotional IQ.

Anatomy of a Tantrum – What Research Shows

Researchers developed a “onesie” that parents in the study could put on a toddler that would then record for several hours, and possibly catch a meltdown. Then they analyzed the pattern of the tantrums. Sad sounds – whimpering and crying – are heard throughout the tantrum; and mixed in were peaks of yelling and screaming – angry sounds. Children tend to build up to a peak of anger quite quickly, then do something physical (throw things, throw themselves on the floor, hit), and then they collapse into sadness.

If parents asked a lot of questions, or tried to verbally reason with the child, it would prolong the tantrum. When a toddler is very angry, he can't process language, and asking questions just pushes him into overload.

Researchers felt the trick to end a tantrum is to get past the anger. Either ignore the child, or respond with as few words as possible. When the child has released anger, what's left is sadness, and they will seek comfort.

Source: www.npr.org/blogs/health/2011/12/05/143062378/whats-behind-a-temper-tantrum-scientists-deconstruct-the-screams and www.education.com/magazine/article/science-of-tantrums/

Managing a tantrum

- Don't “over-respond”. Keep your response calm and low key. You don't want to pay *too much* attention to the tantrum as you don't want to reward the behavior.
- Stay calm. A tantruming child is often overwhelmed by the strength of his own emotions, and needs you to model emotional stability to help re-ground him.
- Don't ask questions or try to talk the child down with a lot of words. If you need to talk to change your child's behavior, or move her to a safer / more appropriate place, give very simple commands.
- Stay close by. Don't hover or crowd, as this may provoke more anger – he may yell at you to ‘go away’. But, staying nearby helps the child feel safer and tells him you're there when he's ready for comfort.
- Don't let your child hurt herself, or anyone else. (Including you.) Keep her from damaging possessions. At times, you may need to physically restrain her to keep things safe – it's OK to firmly hold an upset child in a gentle and supportive way. Sometimes she will resist the hold for a bit, then shift from anger to sadness in your arms.
- Once the tantrum blows over, calm and comfort. Name and validate the emotions they were feeling.
- Tantrums often frighten a child, who can be scared by how out of control they felt, so they may need help calming their fear.
- Sometimes your child will calm down, but *you* will still be full of tension and stress from the experience! Think about self-care methods that help you release that tension and move on – a few deep breaths, a drink of water, taking a short break... Get support from other parents.
- For older children (3 – 5 years), talk about the tantrum later that day when everyone is calm. Validate the emotions they were feeling at the time, but also discuss other ways they could have managed those emotions. Develop plans for how to handle similar situations in the future.

Also check out this Tip sheet on tantrums: www.parentingcounts.org/professionals/parenting-handouts/information-for-parents-temper-tantrums.pdf