

# How to tackle temper tantrums

Sometimes, you have a feeling its coming. Other times, it surprises everyone in its vicinity with its fury and intensity.

We're not talking about not a thunderstorm, tornado or flood. It's an emotional hurricane - the temper tantrum.

You are not alone if you are struggling to deal with temper tantrums from your child. All caregivers have struggled with children throwing fits - at home and in public.

"Tantrums are perfectly normal," Jen Best, certified family life educator with Iowa State University Extension. "I'd be more worried if kids don't ever have temper tantrums."

But normal or not, they can cause stress and frustration for the child, the parents, and anyone else in the vicinity.

So here are some tips from a few Quad-City area experts to prevent temper tantrums and even stop them while they are happening.

## Consider the reasons.

Just like everything in parenting, tantrums happen for a variety of reasons. So experts say the effective way to deal with tantrums really depends on the 'why.'

It's important to understand that few issues in parenting are one-size-fits-all.

The same is true with tantrums. So by understanding the impetus for the tantrum, you are on your way to a resolved issue.

"Children are not born knowing how to be frustrated," says Jennifer. "They are learning skills."

Don't teach your child not to be angry, teach your child HOW to be angry. Here are a few books to help you teach your child to identify emotions and help them understand how to cope with them.

Tantrums are most likely to happen when toddler are hungry, tired or overexcited. So, those are good places to start.

## Be consistent.

Why do you think your child is throwing a temper tantrum? Typically the answer is simple: it has worked in the past.

Kids (and all humans for that matter) are programmed in a similar way. They do what works for them and they stop doing what doesn't work.

"In general, kids do not repeat behavior that doesn't work for them," Jen explains. "If it doesn't get them what they need, then they won't repeat."



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Sue Klingaman, early childhood mental health consultant at Robert Young Center, agrees. "When kids think you will give in, they fight longer and harder."

So, if you are consistent and don't give your child what he wants every time a tantrum strikes, he'll stop throwing fits. Because he knows it won't work.

This takes time. It doesn't happen in one experience. But it's probably worth it for a scream-free trip to Target.

## Remain calm.

The best thing you can do during a tantrum is staying calm. Shaking, spanking or screaming tends to make the tantrum worse, not better.

Think of your reaction as a teachable moment between you and your child. This is showing your son or daughter how to manage emotions in a healthy way. And if you don't want your kids screaming and hitting when they are upset, why would you do it?

"How kids respond to situations very much depends on what is being modeled," Jennifer explains. "Your reaction is teaching them emotional self-regulation."

Jennifer also recommends pausing for 30 seconds before responding to a tantrum. This helps you really get in control of emotions before responding.

## Remove the child from the situation to cool down.

Take your child to a quiet, private place to calm down before dealing with a situation.

"Avoid trying to talk or reason with a screaming child," Jennifer says. "It just doesn't work."

At home, this may mean going to the child's room. In a public place, it could mean a trip to the car or a private area.

## Ignoring tantrums won't make them stop.

Many parents advise ignoring tantrums, but this could actually do more harm than good.

"Ignoring your child often escalates the behavior," explains Sue. "It doesn't work because children will make sure you are listening."

This means ignoring a tantrum may actually make it worse. Your child screams louder, rages more, and may even get more physical (like flailing and throwing himself on the floor).

A tantrum is often a child's way of saying, "Help me." So, think about how you can help the child - without giving in.

## Set limits.

Sometimes, it's challenging to be consistent. And if you are like many parents, you have given in enough in the past that your child continues to throw tantrums.

Now's the time to put your foot down. Gently.

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For example, Sue recommends saying something really simple, as in: "I know you really wanted that toy train. But mom said no."

It's simple, it's definitive, and it's effective. By sticking to your guns every single time, your child will know you aren't going to give in any time he screams and throws himself on the ground.

## Kick up the empathy.

The most surefire way to de-escalate a tantrum while it's happening is to give empathy to your child. (By the way, this is the same thing that can help adults calm down when they are upset.)

Tell your child that you understand. Show your child that you care about his or her feelings. This will help to tone down the tantrum because kids want to feel understood and heard.

## Give your child some control.

In addition to empathy, giving options can also be a great way to get your child to calm down during a tantrum.

"Try to get your child's attention focused on something else," advises Jennifer. "If your child screams when you take away something unsafe, offer something else to play with. This technique works really well with toddlers."

If a child wants a treat, give a few options of what food is available (a snack in your purse). If a child doesn't want to leave a fun activity, give a few options for places you can go next (home to play with toys or to a special lunch place).

This shift can redirect the child's attention and may even tone down the frustration and anger.

## Stopping tantrums before they start.

While tantrums are completely normal, you may notice that your child seems to be having them more often.

Here are a few things you can ask yourself:

- Is there a pattern to my child's tantrums? (Think about whether tantrums are happening at the same time, in the same place, or with the same people.)
- Does my child have predictable routines? (Predictable mealtimes and bedtimes are especially important.)
- Are you giving your child "fake" choices? (Don't ask your child, "Would you like to take a nap?" if you aren't prepared for the answer to be "no." Instead, say, "It's time for a nap.")
- Are you saying no to things that are unimportant? (Make sure you are choosing your battles wisely.)

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## Effectively dealing with tantrums matters.

Dealing with tantrums in a healthy way will do more than save your sanity. It will also help your child learn how to cope with disappointment and manage emotions. These skills are important for a successful future - as a child and adult. (They are also some of the top skills teachers say kids need before entering school.) So, know that your efforts to help eliminate tantrums now will also help your child down the road.

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KEEP GOING.

We've all dealt with tantrums - and it's perfectly normal for kids. But don't necessarily take the easy road to avoid them (by giving them what they want). Instead, stay calm and try some of our expert tips to deal with temper tantrums in a positive way. And the next time you see a parent dealing with a tantrum from their child, think about how you can help. Or at least give a reassuring smile or head nod. We are all in this together.

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*Originally posted on the Now What? Blog 10/1/14. The Now What? Blog served for nearly 7 years to*

- 1. Normalize parents seeking support and help as a manner of child abuse prevention*
- 2. Engage community in how they can work to prevent child abuse*
- 3. Work to build resiliency in families through promotion of the 5 protective factors*

*Maybe you coach a baseball team or you help care for the neighbor kids from time to time. You are investing in the safety and security of the children in our community. Because it truly does take a village to raise our children, we want to offer the tools needed to bring awareness and education to preventing child abuse.*

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