

Why tantrums happen and how to stop them in their tracks

For parents, scary movies don't need zombies or spooky plot lines. Just start with a toddler who is throwing an epic tantrum in public for no apparent reason.

There are few things scarier than that.

While all kids have tantrums, they can feel isolating and impossible to manage for caregivers. But knowing that tantrums are completely normal and what may be causing them may remove some of the panic and fear.

Here are a few things you may not know about your child's tantrums.

Tantrums are often about communication.

Infants cry to communicate. As babies, crying is their only way of telling adults what they need. But when our children are small, they generally don't throw tantrums.

Most toddlers, on the other hand, throw tantrums often and for a wide variety of reasons. (And many make no sense to you.) But the reasons often begin with an inability to communicate.

"Tantrums are perfectly normal," says Jen Best, certified family life educator with

Iowa State University Extension. "I'd be more worried if kids don't ever have temper tantrums."

At this age, kids still have trouble communicating fluently with adults, so they can feel misunderstood and frustrated. The tantrums that happen aren't always logical to us, but can feel vitally important to toddlers.

Start with basic needs.

So, your child feels misunderstood? (Don't we all?) Where do you go from there?

Remember when your growing toddler was a tiny infant? If you are like many caregivers, you likely thought about these three questions when crying happened:

1. Is my child hungry?
2. Is my child tired?
3. Does my child need changed?

Even though your toddler may seem well beyond these simple questions, they are often the most important issues to consider.

Tantrums still stem from these three issues - toddlers get hungry and overly tired. (Hello, missed naptime.) And many are still wearing diapers that need changing.



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Help your child deal with emotions.

It would be a disservice to your child to simply respond to their tantrums without teaching them ways to manage their own emotions.

"Children are not born knowing how to be frustrated," Jen explains. "They are learning skills."

So this means that when your kids throw a tantrum, they are giving you the opportunity to help with their own emotional intelligence.

Tantrums are an ideal time to teach kids the best ways to deal with their own emotions as well as develop empathy for others. (And high levels of emotional intelligence can help your child succeed in a wide variety of ways.)

Tantrums get kids what they want.

By preschool, kids are less likely to throw tantrums. They are already developing the skills needed to manage their emotions and can better communicate with you.

But this is also a time when kids begin to realize that tantrums can be an effective way to get exactly what they want. Throwing a tantrum in the checkout line may earn the child a pack of gum. Throwing a tantrum in their bedroom may extend the child's bedtime.

When you notice that tantrums seem to be happening more frequently, consistency is key.

By giving in to your kids, you are teaching them that tantrums are the way to get exactly what they want. And that means they will happen with greater frequency and intensity in the future.

Being prepared can stop tantrums in their tracks.

If you study your children, you'll discover that there may be commonalities to their tantrums.

Perhaps they are getting overly tired or overly excited. Maybe they always get hungry at the same time of day. By determining a pattern you may be able to stop tantrums before they begin or avoid that situation all together.

For example, if your child is tired at 4 p.m. every day, then avoid going to the grocery store on your way home. If you know your child will be absolutely starving immediately after naptime, make sure a snack is ready to go.

But you can't predict or prevent all tantrums - they are simply a part of raising kids. When they happen, here are a few tips:

- Stay calm. Getting angry, yelling, or shaking your child often makes a tantrum worse instead of better. If you feel yourself losing control of your own emotions make sure you step away, take a break and ask for help.
- Consider your options. Take a few moments to think through your options - you could divert attention to something else, remove a child from the situation, or ignore the behavior in older kids. Sometimes it is helpful to distract a child and move from the emotional (right) side of the brain to the more logical (left) side of the brain. For example, ask a child to find all the circles in the room or list all of the blue things on a shelf.

now what? Keep Going.

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- Discuss. After responding, give your child a chance to cool off and then take the time to discuss the behavior together (along with more appropriate behavior). Remember, your child will not be capable of making rational choices or decisions in the middle of a tantrum. These conversations are much more productive later, when both parties are more collected.
- Show the love. Kids need to know that while you don't approve of tantrums, you always love them. Reminding them of this will help them feel safe and secure.

Tantrums aren't easy and they aren't fun. But they are actually an important part of your child's development. (And they are totally normal.)

now what? | **KEEP GOING.**

When your child is kicking and screaming, it can also bring out the worst in parents. But don't let it. Consider the reasons your child is throwing a tantrum, help your child work through it, and remain consistent.

Before you know, tantrums will be a distant memory.

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Originally posted on the Now What? Blog 8/12/15. 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.

now what? Keep Going.