



So you want to know more about...

Tantrums

The Terrible Twos?

Tantrums *actually* tend to crop up between **1-2** years of age. The average toddler has limited speech, limited social skills, and is cognitively unable to understand concepts such as sharing. Add to that the need for frequent meals and naps that can sometimes be delayed, and you've got a time bomb on your hands!

Some kids throw flashier, longer, and more frequent tantrums than others. Some tantrums are melodramatic crying fits rather than acting out. But the behavior is normal — so much so that it can even be a sign something's wrong if children never "lose it."

So what about older children: 3-5 year-olds who lose it at the mall, restaurants, or childcare? It's a learned behavior. Somewhere in toddlerhood they realized that their tantrums were effective at getting the objects or attention they wanted. Embarrassment can lead adults to placate, which reinforces the child's notion that tantrums work.

With any age, try not to overreact to tantrums. With older children, set firm limits and start natural consequences (consequences which are logically related directly to the inappropriate behavior) at the first sign of tantrum behavior.

Children have tantrums when they feel completely helpless to get what they want or express their feelings. We can do our best to help them before they get to that point of utter impotence, but sometimes kids just need to **let it all hang out**. By giving children a safe place (e.g. a supervised hallway) and time to vent their frustration, at Gretchen's House we try to send the message that kids' feelings are their own and that they can learn to handle them.

Tantrum Sleuthing

Use a journal to determine the triggers for repeated tantrums: take note of the time, place, and any pertinent factors for at least a week. Patterns that emerge will help you prevent future blow outs. Some contributing factors to consider:

- Physical needs: was the child hungry or tired?
- Who else was present?
- What were some indicators of frustration *before* the tantrum?
- How do different responses affect the length and intensity of the tantrums?
- Are there emotional issues that are making things more difficult than usual — things like a move, new caregiver, missing parent, new sibling, family crisis?
- What was your own emotional state right before the tantrum?
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Once you have identified one or more contributing factors, make an action plan for addressing them, through prevention and natural consequences. Share this information with anyone who cares for your child. A consistent response is the best way to extinguish unwanted behaviors.

Further reading

- *Harriet, You'll Drive Me Wild*, by Mem Fox
- *What to Expect The Toddler Years*, by Arlene Eisenberg, Heidi Murkoff & Sandee Hathaway
- *Raising Your Spirited Child*, by Mary Sheeda Kurcinka
- *Where the Wild Things Are*, by Maurice Sendak

Ages & Stages

1-2 years old: Tantrums tend to focus on objects. We provide multiples of desirable toys and stay in small groups to reduce frustration. Naps as needed and frequent small meals also help. Consistent responses and expectations are important.

2-3 years old: Children alternate between wanting more independence and sometimes needing extra TLC and many of their tantrums occur when adults expect them to stay in one role or another. Developmentally appropriate expectations for behavior give kids slack to “backslide” when they are overwhelmed. Frequency should decrease, though tantrums may be more intense.

3-4 years old: Children become more focused on their peers, but are still mastering the concepts of ownership

and respect for others. It helps to show children that their out-of-control behavior makes it hard for other kids to play with them. Children who lose control need help re-entering the group. Natural consequences are the best way to deter tantrums with these kids, who can understand “*if...then*” reasoning.

5 and older: Frequent and/or violent tantrums in school age children can be a sign of other problems: developmental issues, learning disabilities, or emotional problems. Make sure your child is getting enough rest and food, and check to be sure your standards haven’t slipped. Although everyone “loses it” sometimes, recurring tantrums at this age may warrant a psychological consult.

Diffusing Tantrums

Some tantrums can be nipped in the bud before they escalate to full-blown loss of control. Try the following techniques:

- Distract the child (without using bribes or capitulating).
- Verbalize the child’s frustration: “You are really disappointed that we can’t stay and play.”
- Offer a plan to address the issue in the future: “Next time we need more time to play. I’ll remember it’s important to you.”
- Give them some power: offer two mutually acceptable alternatives to what they want.

- Give reminders before events that you know will challenge your child’s disposition.
- Move away from the source of conflict to address it.
- Label their behavior as it occurs: “You are stomping now. If you settle down we can get there faster.”
- Praise every little bit of success. “I see you didn’t slam the door. I bet you feel proud!”
- Don’t talk to a child who’s in the middle of a tantrum. This will prolong it.

Frequently Asked Questions

Won’t “allowing” kids to have full-blown tantrums teach the other kids to do the same? Kids don’t need to be taught how to have a tantrum! We move kids who are having a fit away from the large group to keep everyone safe and give some breathing room. We believe children understand the tantrum dynamic and it is good for them to see other children lose *and* regain their composure. We don’t let tantrums interfere with the group’s activities and may send children to the office to calm down.

My husband says my daughter stomps around because I do. We adults lose our composure, too. Rather than being hard on yourself for your “poor

example,” make it a teaching moment when you lose your cool. Let your daughter see you make amends and show her those times when you *don’t* lose your cool. Watching you cope is one of the best ways for her to learn.

My child sometimes lashes out in a tantrum. Is this normal? Toddlers may throw things or flail in a tantrum, but with older children (3 yrs. and up) a tantrum should be more smoke than fire. They are old enough to know their actions can hurt others. Active aggression must be handled as such.