

TAMING TANTRUMS

What they are, how to avoid them, when you should be concerned, and how to minimize them

Written by Wendy Clark

You told him he couldn't have the toy in the store. Her straw was green instead of blue. And then, the tantrum started. Every parent has been subjected to them, these lovely fits of rage from a tiny human who can impressively meltdown faster and more dramatically than Kanye West at an awards show.

Why They Do It

Why do toddlers and preschoolers (or yikes...older kids!) act this way, anyway? "It's all about expression," says Dr. Cynthia Palmer at Texas Children's Pediatrics - Cinco Ranch. "From around birth through early toddlerhood, children communicate primarily through crying. Human nature is to use what works to get a quick response, so they do what they know works," she says. She also explains that kids have great memories, and even once they learn to communicate more effectively, they sometimes fall

back on their tantrums because they think you'll give in. Don't be tempted!

How to Avoid It

Obviously, the best way to avoid a tantrum is to try and eliminate the "triggers," or likely causes, before they become nuclear situations. The number one reason for a tantrum is being tired. "Toddlers need around 14 hours of sleep in a 24-hour period to get adequate rest," Dr. Palmer says. Make sure your child is getting enough quality sleep both at night and a daytime nap, if necessary. Another common



cause is hunger. When a tantrum strikes, consider how long it has been since his last meal and offer your child a nutritious snack. Not only might his mood stabilize, but it will also serve as a welcome diversion from the path to Chernobyl.

When to Worry

Sometimes, frequent tantrums or violent behavior can be a sign of something more serious going on with your child. "By age 4, most children have learned problem-solving skills and the tantrums should be few and far between," Dr. Palmer says. Older children still having frequent tantrums, over-aggressive behavior from a child of any age, or a parent's sustained negative emotions regarding tantrums are all reasons to seek help from your child's pediatrician. Your child's doctor can work with you to determine whether the issues are medical or behavioral in nature, and give you tools to help you cope in the meantime.

There Is Hope

Above all, it's important to remember that "kids aren't doing this to be hurtful toward you," Dr. Palmer counsels. She suggests encouraging children to "use their words" to try and express their needs or wants, and reminds parents that patience and understanding can go a long way in diffusing a situation. "Parental calmness is key," she advises. Once a tantrum is underway, distracting the child and diverting their attention can help them forget why they were angry in the first place. Dr. Palmer reassures parents that as language skills develop, parents can expect that tantrum frequency will decrease over time. **KM**

WENDY CLARK mothers five kids, aged 6 months to 10 years. She's experienced more than her fair share of meltdowns.

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For more information on tantrums or other health topics, check out Texas Children's Pediatrics health library at texaschildrens.staywellsolutionsonline.com.

TIPS FOR TAMING TANTRUMS

IGNORE - Don't react and give in to the child's tantrum. If you do, you are setting yourselves up for more tantrums.

BE CONSISTENT - If you said no, mean it. Inconsistent parenting increases tantrums because children know you don't always mean what you say.

USE YOUR WORDS - Teach children to replace the tantrum with calm words expressing their feelings. At the first onset of a tantrum calmly say, "Use your words so I can understand you."

SAY IT FOR THEM - Sometimes non-verbal children get upset because they can't communicate. Empathize with them by saying, "I understand. I know you're angry right now because you couldn't have that candy bar."

LISTEN & COMMUNICATE - When your child does use his words, stop and listen. Be in the moment and really have a caring dialogue about the issue so he will learn how to get his needs met appropriately.