

STUDENT SUPPORT DEPARTMENT

7 TIPS TO PREVENT TANTRUMS BEFORE THEY HAPPEN

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Tantrums can happen at the store, the doctor's office, or the party your child's been looking forward to for weeks. Something snaps and your child has a total, tectonic, temper tantrum: screaming, kicking, tears. Nothing you say calms your child down, strangers are gaping, and before it's over you feel like flinging yourself to the ground and bawling, too. Small children have little control over their lives and few words to communicate their desires and disappointments. Tantrums are a normal expression of frustration from a little person who wants her/his way – and doesn't have the skills to express herself/himself yet.

7 ways to prevent tantrums

1. Mind the basics.

Is your child thirsty, hungry, overtired, or over-stimulated? These are common preconditions for tantrums. Carry snacks and water on outings, and avoid potential tantrum triggers – a shopping trip, for example – when you know your child is tired.

2. Use the 5-minute warning.

No one likes to see a good thing end. Give your child a warning before you leave the playground or a play date, so it won't be a surprise. Setting expectations for yourself and communicating them clearly to your child can make a world of difference. "We're leaving in 10 minutes. In 5 minutes I expect you to get your shoes and socks on and say good-byes."

3. Pay attention to attention.

Could your child be throwing tantrums to get your attention? If this is the case, make sure you get special time with your child, but don't allow the tantrum to be the immediate reason for it. (You don't want to reinforce the behavior). When your child behaves well, show him you notice that as much as his meltdowns. Basically, pour on the positive attention.

4. Routines rule.

Develop family routines — regular meal and bedtimes, for example — and stick to them. Young children's lives are full of change and near-constant stimulation. Plus, they're growing so fast — anything you can do to add stability will help them feel more secure.

5. Use feeling words.

Encourage your child to label and describe his feelings. You can help your child develop vocabulary to express himself by saying things like, "I can tell you are feeling frustrated because you really wanted a treat," or "Did it make you mad when Lily yelled at you?"

6. Give (limited) choices.

The set up here is important: don't give your child free rein to state any whim. Instead, offer up two or three viable options — whether it's a snack, an activity, or what to wear. For example, you can say, "You need to wear shoes to school because that is the rule. Would you rather wear your tennis shoes or your boots?" Pediatrician Laurel Schultz emphasizes that matters of safety should never be negotiated: a child must always use a seat belt, for example, whether he wants to or not.

7. Change the channel.

At this age, distraction works like a charm. If you see trouble ahead over an off-limits item, your best bet is to offer up something else. And if your child is becoming upset or overstimulated, suggest another activity or remove her from the situation.