

Temper Tantrums: Helping Handout for School and Home

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INTRODUCTION

A temper tantrum is an emotional outburst that is typically more intense than the situation warrants and is difficult to manage or end. Although temper tantrums may be annoying and inconvenient for the adult, they are a completely normal part of child development. They are most commonly seen in children between the ages of 2 and 4 years; over half of children under the age of 5 years have experienced a temper tantrum. Temper tantrums can be hard to predict and may happen at home, at school, or even in the grocery store.

WHAT TO CONSIDER WHEN SELECTING INTERVENTIONS AND SUPPORTS

Temper tantrums can be influenced by many factors, making them difficult to prevent, manage, and stop. Three major factors are discussed below: (a) developmental level, (b) triggers, and (c) the stages of temper tantrums.

Developmental Level

The flailing, screaming, and occasional punch that constitute many temper tantrums are a normal part of human development. Toddlers and preschoolers are trying to make sense of the world around them. During this time, their perspective on the world begins to shift from being self-centered to understanding the perspective of others. Having a self-centered perspective largely explains why temper tantrums first emerge when children become frustrated and do not get what they want. Compounding the problem, children at this age do not yet have the language or resources to appropriately express their emotions and ask for help from adults. This narrow view of the

world and lack of language lead to strong emotional outbursts that are often hard to contain. Parents and teachers need to guide young children in learning the emotional coping strategies and language to properly handle their often volatile emotions. They also need to help ensure that temper tantrums are not successful—that is, allowing children to get what they want. When successful, temper tantrums are likely to continue.

Although temper tantrums are a normal part of child development, adults should be aware of when they may signify more serious problems, such as oppositional defiant disorder. Parents should seek help from a mental health specialist when tantrums persist past the age of 6, occur often (e.g., more than 10 times a month), and are characterized by intense behaviors such as extreme physical aggression, verbal aggression, and self-injury.

Triggers

A number of triggering situations may frustrate a child and lead to a temper tantrum. For example, a child's temper tantrums might be triggered by feeling hungry, tired, overwhelmed, or overstimulated. Often they are triggered by anxiety or stress, although they appear to be due to anger and stubbornness. Tantrums also can be triggered by the child wanting attention or failing to get what he or she wants. Each child may have a different set of common triggers. It is important to take note of the possible triggers each time a tantrum occurs, because a different trigger may warrant a different intervention, as well as indicate the best method of prevention.

Stages of a Temper Tantrum

Social scientists have long studied temper tantrums, especially how and when to intervene. Most recently,

researchers have demonstrated that temper tantrums often have a clear pattern of anger characterized by loud yelling, screaming, or even kicking, followed by sadness, crying, and a request for comfort. When and how a parent, teacher, or other adult reacts or intervenes influences the cyclic nature of a tantrum, and often ends the tantrum or decreases its intensity. A child in the anger stage of a tantrum will be difficult to calm down, so it is often better to wait until the child passes through this stage. A child in the emotional stage of a tantrum often requires comforting to calm down and rejoin an activity. Awareness of the early signs and stages of a tantrum can be valuable in preventing one from escalating to the anger stage.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Most of the recommendations for preventing and responding to temper tantrums apply to both school and home, although some fit one setting more so than the other. They are divided into four general categories: (a) preventing temper tantrums, (b) managing noncompliant or attention-seeking tantrums, (c) managing overstimulated or anxious tantrums, and (d) interacting after the tantrum.

Preventing Temper Tantrums

1. **Establish expectations for the situation.** Children do best if they are provided with the rules, expectations, and a plan for the activity or place. Be clear so that children understand what they should do, what happens if they do it, and what happens if they do not.
2. **Teach social-emotional skills.** Teach social-emotional skills similarly to how you would teach reading or other academic skills. Just as children are taught and practice academic skills, they should be taught and practice social-emotional skills such as recognizing and naming feelings, managing anger and aggression, and expressing feelings in appropriate ways.
3. **Say no without saying NO.** Children often respond better to situations and commands when adults engage them in empathic conversations. Instead of saying, "No, you may not have the candy," it is often more effective to let children know that you understand they want the candy but that it is bedtime. Give a choice of two healthy snacks. Offering choices gives children the feeling of control. It also helps to remind children that they

may have some candy tomorrow, or whenever it is appropriate.

4. **Use effective commands.** Tell the child exactly what you want. Stating "Sit down, please" is typically more effective than asking a question such as "Would you sit down?" Don't give a choice when the child doesn't actually have one. Effective commands make clear what is expected.
5. **Redirect the child.** Redirecting is most effective at the beginning stages of a tantrum. Divert the child's attention away from the current concern to something completely different.
6. **Modify the task length.** If the child has a pattern of getting upset when required to do an undesirable task, try breaking the task, or assignment, into smaller, more manageable pieces with scheduled breaks in between.
7. **Incorporate the child's interests into daily tasks.** Use the child's interests to make undesirable tasks more appealing. For example, if the child has temper tantrums during reading, select texts based on the child's interests.
8. **Provide support during transitions.** Use strategies to prepare the child for transitions throughout the day to avoid eliciting a meltdown. Strategies include warnings, using a timer to count down, making eye contact, creating a routine, and providing visual schedules or cues.
9. **Increase motivation.** Ask the child to do two or three easy things before introducing a more challenging or undesirable task. Once children experience success from performing smaller tasks, they often become more motivated to complete the more difficult task.

Responding to Temper Tantrums

10. **Don't give in to tantrums.** A helpful strategy for tantrums triggered by not getting what the child wants is to let the tantrum run its course, if the child is safe, and the behavior is not harming others. Make sure the child does not get the desired thing or activity. After the tantrum, when the child is calm, explain that throwing a temper tantrum is not how you get what you want. Teach the child the appropriate way to ask for something.
11. **Avoid giving the child attention during a tantrum.** Parents might move the child to another location with less of an audience (go to the car, go to the bathroom, or implement a time-out); teachers can direct the class to ignore the child. Unlike when parents are preventing tantrums, during a tantrum

avoid eye contact and do not speak to the child until the emotional state has subsided.

12. **Stay calm.** After the emotional state has subsided, use a calming and quiet, but firm tone when speaking with the child. Use short direct phrases to prompt the child to follow your directions. Using light physical prompts and modeling the expected behavior also might help. Keep your body language soft so the child does not think you are upset, as this might trigger increased anger on the child's part (and yours). Move away from and ignore the child if you are hit or kicked.
13. **Provide encouragement and understanding.** When young children become overstimulated or anxious, the best response may be to label the child's feelings and to provide encouragement and understanding. A feelings board may be used to help the child identify the upsetting feelings. Parents and teachers could then state, "You are frustrated. Let me help you." The child could then pick a calm-down strategy from different pictures. Model the strategy and help the child use it.
14. **Remove the child from the situation.** An anxious or overstimulated child may need to leave the situation to calm down. Providing a calm, sensory-appropriate, quiet space to work out feelings can give an upset child a sense of control and a place to disengage from whatever triggered the tantrum. Calm-down spaces can be used to allow the child to let out emotions in a safe, relaxing environment.
15. **Help the child express feelings with words.** Children have a hard time expressing feelings when they are upset. Try describing what you think is wrong and labeling the feeling, which will often help the child calm down. Or let the child choose pictures from a feeling board that look like or express the uncomfortable feelings.
16. **Teach replacement skills.** A replacement behavior refers to an alternative behavior that serves the same purpose as the challenging behavior. The child may need to learn a skill, such as requesting a break or asking for help with a task, that replaces the emotions that often lead to a tantrum. Teaching replacement behaviors can be done after the child has calmed down, but it also should be continued, such as by reading stories to teach how to ask for things that a child may need when they are feeling a particular way (e.g., what characters do when they are angry or disappointed), role playing or practicing the replacement behavior, and having adults model appropriate ways to cope with emotions.
17. **Use time-out from positive reinforcement.** After trying the above recommendations, if the child's tantrum continues, then a time-out may be warranted. The key to the effectiveness of time-out is the addition of the phrase "from positive reinforcement." That is, to be effective, the strategy must remove the child from a desirable or rewarding situation. For example, if the child does not like circle time or family game night, then being removed from the activity is not a time-out from positive reinforcement. For the child who does not want to be involved in the activity anyway, the time-out may encourage the child to have a tantrum to get out of the activity instead of curtailing it. There are many ways of handling a time-out, and some children respond better to one method than another. The exact procedures can be matched to the needs of the child, adult, and environment. However, the same basic steps should be followed, as presented below (see websites listed under Recommended Resources for more details):
 - a. Teach the child the procedure and expectations for time-out before it is needed.
 - b. Request the directive twice before putting the child in time-out (e.g., "Maurice, you need clean up now."). Therefore, after the directive has been given, repeat the request only once. Then restate the nature of the request and the consequence of time-out (e.g., "I asked you to clean up. You are now in time-out."). Remember to maintain a neutral tone.
 - c. Remove the child to a designated area or chair, or simply turn the child away from the activity. Do not pay attention to the child unless the child is a danger to self or others.
 - d. Set a timer as a reminder of the length of time-out and as a cue to calm down. Use the length of time taught to the child when time-out was practiced. The length of time should not exceed 5 minutes for children 5 years and under and 10 minutes for children ages 6 to 10 years. Shorter intervals work as well as longer amounts of time.
 - e. Do not remove the child from time-out until the child is calm. If the child has reached their maximum length of time as stated above, remind the child they need to be calm to leave the time-out area. Restart the timer if the child is still in the tantrum at the end of the designated time. Only end the time-out when the child is calm.

- f. Say to the child in a calm, neutral voice, “Your time-out is over. Please clean up the toys.” Provide specific praise for completing the task and welcome the child back into the activity. Repeat the procedure if the child continues to refuse.
- g. If the child needs multiple time-outs before complying with the request or calming down, the parent or teacher should consider seeking consultation from a mental health specialist for a different approach to the tantrum.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Websites

<http://www.interventioncentral.org/behavioral-interventions/challenging-students/time-out-reinforcement>

The Intervention Central website has specific steps that educators and parents should follow when implementing time-out from positive reinforcement.

<http://www.rasmussen.edu/degrees/education/blog/dealing-with-tantrums-in-the-classroom/>

This website at Rasmussen College provides educators with 10 tactics for dealing with tantrums in the classroom.

<http://kidshealth.org/en/parents/tantrums.html>

The KidsHealth website provides parents and educators with information about the nature of tantrums and how best to prevent them.

Books for Parents

Edwards, C. D. (1999). *How to handle a hard-to-handle kid: A parent's guide to understanding and changing problem behaviors*. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit.

This book provides parents with advice, insight, and strategies to support structure, direction, and family problem solving.

Janis-Norton, N. (2013). *Calmer, easier, happier parenting: Five strategies that end the daily battles and get kids to listen the first time*. New York, NY: Penguin Group.

This book is full of examples and stories from parents, offering the complete toolkit for achieving peaceful, productive parenting.

Phelan, T. W. (2014). *Tantrums! Managing meltdowns in public and private (1-2-3 magic parenting)*. Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, Inc.

This book gives parents simple, easy-to-follow directions on how best to manage the problem and guide kids appropriately.

Books to Read With Children

Bang, M. (1999). *When Sophie gets angry—really, really angry*. New York, NY: Blue Sky Press.

Dewdney, A. (2007). *Llama, Llama mad at Mama*. New York, NY: Penguin Random House.

Pieper, M. H. (2017). *Jilly's terrible temper tantrums: And how she outgrew them*. Chicago, IL: Smart Love Press.

Related Helping Handouts

Oppositional Defiant Disorder: Helping Handout for Home

Preventing and Correcting Misbehavior and Developing Self-Discipline: Helping Handout for Home

Using Praise and Rewards Wisely: Helping Handout for School and Home

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