



## Taking the Terror Out of Toddler Tantrums



**E**very parent has been there or witnessed it: You're standing in the checkout line at a grocery store. You hear a shriek and the next thing you see is the unbridled fury of a toddler or preschooler who has lost control of his or her emotions.

What you may not realize is that there are usually small warning flags that signal a tantrum. And being able to recognize these signals in your toddler can help you defuse the situation before it gets out of hand.

For example, you may notice your child acting bored, whining, begging, ignoring or just constantly stopping. Cranky behavior such as fidgeting, teasing, irritability and resisting the smallest request is a big clue that an emotional meltdown may be coming soon. Some

children simply start to shut down. They may display sleepy or sluggish behavior, and refuse fun things or avoid interacting with the rest of the family.

Unfortunately, many parents completely miss these cues. Perhaps it's because of our busy schedules. We have a thousand things to do and so little time to do them. And the duties of parenting can be overwhelming. However, when you can avoid a trip through the out-of-control and emotional minefield of a child's tantrums, you'll have one less thing to deal with in an all-too-busy schedule.

### Responding BEFORE a tantrum happens

The best approach is to catch a problem behavior while it is small and use positive distraction to turn a bad situation around. Here are some tips:

- **DON'T start counting.** Many parents start warning and threatening their children by "counting down" before taking action to correct their behavior. Sometimes this threat just leads to a power struggle. Instead, when you notice a small problem behavior, correct it immediately. Start by giving an instruction and using a positive distraction: "You are whining. Come here and listen. Let's play Simon Says. 'Simon says to very quietly read a book.'" Another option is to give an instruction and a small consequence like a Time-Out: "You are whining. Stop talking. When the timer goes off in two minutes, you may talk again."
- **Prevent problem behavior.** Children learn best by repetition. Make it part of your child's daily routine to practice working on staying calm. Teach and practice calm-down skills three times in the morning, three times at noon and three times at night. Reward your child with praise each time he or

[continued >](#)

she practices. Your child will be nine times better at being calm, regardless of the situation.

- **Head them off at the pass.** When you notice your child fidgeting, being cranky or shutting down while you are on an outing, that's your cue to begin wrapping things up. Maybe you will miss the sale or that extra dinner item, but you will have your sanity.
- **Mix it up.** Take along a few things to distract and entertain your child. Children have short attention spans and need a variety of things to keep them occupied. Try bringing along some "finger fun" – books, hand toys, a small flashlight, stickers, flashcards, paper and special crayons, play food – to keep your little one occupied.

## Responding WHEN a tantrum happens

Even when your child has a meltdown, remember that you need to control your own emotions and correct your child's behavior. Here are a few more strategies to help you and your child stay in control:

- **Train for the task.** Take time each day to practice your own personal staying-calm plan. The plan can be as simple as taking several deep breaths or as involved as reciting a positive message in your head. Also, have a game plan for what to say and do when your child acts out. It's also important that parents encourage and enforce the same behavioral expectations for their child. Devise signals or choose "clue words" that will alert you or your spouse when your emotions are starting to run high or when your child's behavior is spiraling out of control. Always be consistent. Say what you mean, and mean what you say.
- **Never surrender.** Avoid arguing or debating with your toddler. Teach, don't preach. The more rational you are, the quicker your child is likely to respond. Parents who surrender are parents who exhibit the same behaviors they're trying to stop (yelling, arguing, threatening, etc.). Don't sacrifice your adult role to act out your child's naughty behavior.
- **Return to the crime.** Your first reaction after stopping a tantrum may be to escape from the scene and get back to something more pleasant. However, your child should have the opportunity to undo whatever he or she did. Children are never

too young to start taking responsibility for their actions. If your child acted out by making a mess, saying naughty words, hitting others or destroying objects, make him or her correct the situation. That means cleaning up the mess, apologizing, doing something nice for others or replacing what was broken. Children who have to deal with their negative actions learn a valuable lesson.

- **Use effective consequences.** For example, if your child acts out in a store, don't threaten to never bring him or her to that store again; that's unrealistic. More effective consequences would be taking your child to the car for a Time-Out or taking away a snack, a possession, playtime or some other privilege.

If you go to the car for a Time-Out, give your child a few minutes to calm down, and then complete the Time-Out. Then, clearly describe the appropriate behavior you expect him or her to use when you go back in the store. You may even want to help your child practice how to follow instructions and accept "No" for an answer.

After you've explained your expectations and practiced with your child, return to the store. Then let your child demonstrate what you just taught by giving simple instructions and praising your child for following your directions.

## Additional Resources

- **Help! There's a Toddler in the House!** by Thomas M. Reimers, Ph.D.
- **I Brake For Meltdowns: How To Handle The Most Exasperating Behavior Of Your 2- To 5-Year-Old** by Michelle Nicholasen and Barbara O'Neal
- **Parenting the Strong-Willed Child: The Clinically Proven Five-Week Program for Parents of Two- to Six-Year-Olds** by Rex Forehand and Nicholas Long

➡ **For more information** or to make an appointment at the Boys Town Center for Behavioral Health, call **531-355-3358**.

Visit **BoysTown.org/Parenting** for more information from the parenting experts at Boys Town.

