

You, your toddler, and tantrums

Almost any parent can remember the so-called terrible twos (or even threes). For some families, tantrums are a part of daily life. A tantrum usually involves your toddler suddenly dropping to the floor, screaming, crying, and kicking because he can't get his socks on, or cannot have the treat he wanted. Although stressful and frustrating for any parent, this behaviour is actually a normal part of your child's development.

Between the ages of 1 and 3, a child's ability to talk about their wants, needs, and feelings is not yet fully developed. They may understand what you are saying, but they can't talk about how they feel about it. A toddler is often trying to be more independent, but they struggle with their own physical limitations and lack of control over their world. Mix together a helping of fierce independence, some strong emotions, and poor language skills and you have the perfect recipe for a tantrum. The good news is that tantrums usually become less frequent around age 3 or 4, as they learn to communicate and deal with such strong feelings.

There are a few things you can do to handle tantrums more effectively, or even avoid them all together.

- **A little taking goes a long way:** While your child is upset, there is no reasoning with him. Give him time and space to calm, and keep him safe if you feel he may hurt himself.
- **Realistic Expectations:** Know your child's limits. If it is past nap time, it may not be a good idea to take her to Wal-Mart to run those last few errands.
- **Be consistent:** Handle a tantrum in public the same way you would at home.
- **Let them make some decisions:** Give your toddler the chance to make small choices throughout the day so that he has some sense of control and independence. Do you want cereal or fruit for breakfast?
- **Tears grow the brain:** Children will rarely enjoy boundaries and rules. But, these boundaries are an important part of the learning process. No one is comfortable letting a child cry but it's often very important that they do so. It's how they understand your expectations, and trust in what you say. Sit with your child, comfort them, and let them know that it's ok to be upset; you'll be there to soothe them, even though you make the rules. Remember that a 'time out' only teaches your toddler that you will walk away the minute they need you to help them calm down. Try a 'time *with*' instead.
- **Does your child want your attention?** If so, then they need more of your attention when they are not having a tantrum. The cure for attention seeking is always more attention, given at the right time.

Children with delays in language, problem solving, or social skills, may have tantrums more often, more intensely, or may not outgrow them in the same way as a typically developing child. A developmental psychologist can help parents understand their child's unique needs and abilities so that they can more effectively manage challenging behaviours such as tantrums. If you have concerns about your child's development, you can call us at 637-5284.

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