

Taming Tantrums and Toddler Meltdowns

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Why do toddlers have meltdowns (tantrums or tears)

Life can be hard for a toddler, and sometimes things happen that make them so sad, or so mad, or so scared that they have an emotional meltdown where they are completely overwhelmed by their feelings. They may cry, yell, or kick. They may throw themselves on the ground. Here are some of the reasons toddlers melt down:

1. Rules: They want to do something you won't allow, and they're angry that you are blocking them.
2. Impossibilities: They want something that's not *possible*, and can't understand when you explain.
3. Lack of control: They have little choice about what they do, where they go, or when things happen.
4. Frustration: They want to be able to do something that they know other people can do, but they can't.
5. Can't communicate: They need or want something and don't have the words to tell you what it is.
6. Attention: If they've asked repeatedly for your attention, and haven't gotten it, they may melt down.
7. Separation: They count on you for everything, so it's hard when you're not there.
8. Physical needs: They're tired, hungry, thirsty, sick, cold, hot, or overstimulated. Or their normal routine has changed. These factors can turn any minor upset into an overwhelming one.
9. Can't regulate: The part of their brain that will help regulate emotion (their "upstairs brain") is still developing. They can't calm themselves down just because you say "it's not worth being upset about."

Preventing Meltdowns

Even if you were the perfect parent, and did absolutely everything right, there would still be times when your child would melt down!! But there are some ways that we can reduce the incidence:

- Meet physical needs: Your child is less likely to melt down if he is rested, fed, and comfortable.
- Be aware of triggers - things you know upset your child. Pick your battles – on a good day, you might push your child to try challenging things and coach them through. On a bad day, you may skip it.
- Set expectations: Tell them ahead of time what to expect, what behavior you're expecting of them, and what the consequences will be if they can't behave that way.
- Give choices where you can. (But don't offer choices in the middle of a tantrum; that's overwhelming!)
- Set limits and follow them consistently. You will face the occasional tantrum, but with consistent enforcement, over time the child learns and respects the family limits, and will have fewer meltdowns.
- Watch for early cues: Notice when your child is reaching the end of her rope. Let her know that you've noticed – that helps her learn to recognize it for herself. Try distraction or a change of scenery.
- Talk about meltdowns when they're NOT having one. Praise your child when they've done a good job of calming themselves down – we want to reinforce their efforts at self-regulation.
- Talk about, and model, positive ways to manage feelings. Use Emotion Coaching to build emotional IQ.

Anatomy of a Tantrum – What Research Shows. Researchers found that sad sounds – whimpering and crying – can be heard throughout a tantrum, but anger sounds – yelling and screaming – came in peaks then faded. Children tend to build to a peak of anger quickly, then do something physical (throw things, throw themselves on the floor, hit, and so on) and then collapse into sadness. If parents asked a lot of questions, or tried to verbally "reason" with the child, while the anger was building to a peak, it would prolong the tantrum. When a toddler is very angry, he can't process language, or understand explanations. Asking questions just pushes him into overload.

Researchers felt the trick to end a tantrum is to get past the anger. Either ignore the child, or respond calmly with as few words as possible until that anger peaks and is released. When the child has released anger, what's left is sadness, and if you're present and calm, they will seek comfort.

Source: www.npr.org/blogs/health/2011/12/05/143062378/whats-behind-a-temper-tantrum-scientists-deconstruct-the-screams and www.education.com/magazine/article/science-of-tantrums/

Upstairs and downstairs brain: Neuropsychiatrist Daniel Siegel uses an analogy for understanding a child's developing brain. There's the downstairs brain (brain stem and limbic system) that is responsible for survival (breathing, eating, digesting) and emotions. That part of the brain is full developed and functioning in a toddler. Then there's the upstairs brain (parietal lobe, frontal lobe, and prefrontal cortex) that is responsible for more advanced functions like language, decision-making, impulse control and empathy. All those functions take many years to develop – through adolescence and beyond. When a toddler is very upset, their extreme emotions block their ability to use their upstairs brain and they regress back to their downstairs brain.

If a child is tantruming, and we stand above them, leaning over, yelling or threatening, that activates survival mode downstairs brain. But so does talking too much or offering too many choices. Both prolong a meltdown.

To calm a child, we need to get down to their level, stay very calm, use very few words. If we need them to take action, explain the action in a clear, concise command. Don't give choices or suggest options. Learn more: http://msue.anr.msu.edu/news/understanding_the_upstairs_and_downstairs_brain

Managing a tantrum

- Don't "over-respond". Keep your response calm and low key. You don't want to pay *too much* attention to the tantrum as you don't want to reward the behavior.
- Stay calm. A tantruming child is often overwhelmed by the strength of his own emotions, and needs you to model emotional stability to help re-ground him.
- Don't ask questions or try to talk the child down with a lot of words. If you need to talk to change your child's behavior, or move her to a safer / more appropriate place, give very simple commands.
- Stay close by. Don't hover or crowd, as this may provoke more anger – he may yell at you to 'go away'. But, staying nearby helps the child feel safer and tells him you're there when he's ready for comfort.
- Don't let your child hurt herself, or anyone else. Keep her from damaging possessions. At times, you may need to physically restrain her to keep things safe – it's OK to firmly hold an upset child in a gentle and supportive way. Sometimes she will resist for a bit, then shift from anger to sadness in your arms.
- Once the tantrum blows over, calm and comfort. Name and validate the emotions they were feeling.
- Tantrums often frighten a child, who can be scared by how out of control they felt, so they may need help calming their fear.
- Sometimes your child will calm down, but *you* will still be full of tension and stress from the experience! Think about self-care methods that help you release that tension and move on – a few deep breaths, a drink of water, taking a short break... Get support from other parents.
- For older children (3 – 5 years), talk about the tantrum later that day when everyone is calm. Validate the emotions they were feeling at the time, but also discuss other ways they could have managed those emotions. Develop plans for how to handle similar situations in the future.

Also check out this Tip sheet on tantrums: www.parentingcounts.org/professionals/parenting-handouts/information-for-parents-temper-tantrums.pdf