

Taming Tantrums and Managing Meltdowns

Janelle Durham, MSW, Parent Educator. GoodDaysWithKids.com, InventorsOfTomorrow.com

Why do children have tantrums or meltdowns?

Life can feel really hard for a young child, and sometimes things happen that make them so sad, so mad, or so scared that they are completely overwhelmed by their feelings. They may cry, yell, hit or kick. They may throw themselves on the ground. Here are some of the reasons kids melt down:

1. Rules: They want to do something you won't allow, and they're angry that you're 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, when things happen.
4. Frustration: They want to be able to do things they know other people can do, but they can't.
5. Can't communicate: They need or want something and don't have words to tell you what that is.
6. Separation: They count on you for everything, so it's hard when you're not there.
7. Physical needs: They're tired, hungry, thirsty, sick, cold, hot, or overstimulated.
8. Can't regulate: The part of their brain that will help regulate emotion ("upstairs brain") is still developing. They can't calm themselves down just because you tell them to.

Just put yourself in your child's shoes. Imagine being a toddler who *really* wants a cracker. You try and try to tell a grownup, and when they *finally* understand, they say "sorry, I don't have any crackers." That's upsetting! But you decide you can settle in and play, but then the puzzle is *really hard*. So you try to push the puzzle pieces in between the couch cushions where you can't see them anymore, and the grown-up says no. You decide to play with your toy cars, and then someone just picks you up, puts on your coat and carries you away from your toys. That's the final straw! Of course you would melt down.

Preventing Meltdowns

Even if you did everything right, your child would still tantrum at times. But we can reduce the chances:

- Meet physical needs: Your child is less likely to melt down if they're 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, go easy.
- 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 when you can. (Don't offer choices in the midst of a tantrum; that's overwhelming!)
- Set limits and follow them consistently. You will face occasional tantrums, but with consistent limits, over time the child learns and respects the family rules and will have fewer meltdowns.
- 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 efforts at self-regulation.
- Talk about, and model, positive ways to manage feelings. Use Emotion Coaching.
- Give lots of positive attention whenever they're behaving in a positive way.
- Watch for early cues: Notice when your child is reaching the end of her rope. Let *them* know – that helps them learn to recognize it for themselves. Try distraction or a change of scenery.
- If you can notice that escalation (when a child is starting to get over-excited, or angry, or upset) *when it's starting*, you may be able to ward off a tantrum by stepping in to soothe them.

However, once a child is in meltdown, those same soothing techniques may not help.

Anatomy of a Tantrum

Tantrums tend to follow a predictable course – a child escalates up, hits a peak of anger – yelling and screaming. Then they often do something physical (kicking, hitting, throwing themselves to the floor) and then they collapse into sadness. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RoKIEPxRhZI>

If parents ask a lot of questions or try to verbally “reason” with a child while the anger is at its peak, it prolongs the tantrum. When a toddler is very angry, they can’t process language. Asking questions or explaining will push them into overload, and they get stuck in an anger trap.

The trick to end a tantrum is to get past the anger. During a tantrum, 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 then seek comfort.

Source: www.npr.org/blogs/health/2011/12/05/143062378/whats-behind-a-temper-tantrum-scientists-deconstruct-the-screams and <https://nurturescienceprogram.org/the-tantrum-cycle-and-how-to-get-out-of-it/>

Downstairs brain: Neuropsychiatrist Daniel Siegel uses an analogy for understanding the brain. The downstairs brain (brain stem, limbic system) is responsible for survival and emotions. It’s fully developed in a toddler. The upstairs brain (parietal lobe, frontal lobe, prefrontal cortex) is responsible for advanced functions like language, decision-making, impulse control and empathy. These take *years* to develop – through adolescence and beyond. When a child is very upset, extreme emotions block their ability to use their upstairs brain. They regress back to the downstairs brain. They “flip their lid.”

If a child is tantrum-ing, and we stand above them, leaning over, yelling, 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, get down to their level, stay very calm, use very few words. Don’t give choices or suggest options. If we need them to take action explain the action in a clear, concise command. Learn more: http://msue.anr.msu.edu/news/understanding_the_upstairs_and_downstairs_brain

Managing a tantrum

- Don’t “over-respond”. Keep calm and low key. Don’t pay *too much* attention to a tantrum because you don’t want to reward the behavior with attention (don’t “feed the monster”).
- Stay calm. A tantrum-ing child is often overwhelmed by the strength of their own emotions and needs you to model emotional stability to help re-ground them. CO-REGULATION is key.
- 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 them to a safer place, give very simple commands.
- Stay close by. Don’t hover or crowd, as this provokes anger – they may yell at you to ‘go away’. Being nearby helps a child feel safer and tells them you’re there when they’re ready for comfort.
- Don’t let your child hurt themselves, other people or things. At times, you might need to physically restrain them to keep things safe. First, be sure that you’re calm enough to do this gently. Then say something like “I need to hold you so you can’t hit your brother.” They will resist for a bit, then often shift from anger to sadness in your arms.
- *After* the tantrum blows over, calm and comfort. Name and validate emotions they were feeling.
- Tantrums often frighten a child. It’s scary to feel out of control. Help to calm their fear.
- Sometimes after your child has calmed down, *you* are still full of tension and stress. Use self-care to help you release tension and move on – deep breaths, a short break, or get support.
- For older children (3+), talk about the tantrum later when everyone’s calm. Validate the emotions they were feeling but discuss other ways they could have managed those emotions.