

LifeSkills

How to deal with your preschooler's temper tantrums

Parenting

Between the ages of two and five, children become more independent and assertive. They begin to walk, feed themselves, and their vocabulary increases almost on a daily basis. They learn to count and the rudiments of reading. Acquiring these and other skills leads to growing feelings of independence.

The difficult job of emotional control

Perhaps the most difficult learning task facing young children is emotional control. This requires the child to learn the balance between what they would like to do and the boundaries of acceptable family behavior.

When the child bumps up against this boundary the result is often a temper tantrum.

Their feelings of frustration are more than they can handle and explode into what are called anger bursts.

Their anger and frustration are mirrored in their behavior. This can include screaming, kicking, or the child throwing himself on the floor.

Anger bursts are normal

Temper tantrums are a normal part of children's emotional development. Knowing this is nevertheless small comfort for parents who have to deal with them. Here is some information about temper tantrums and some suggestions for ways to deal with them.

The risk of "buying" peace

Parents at a loss as to how to deal with their child's anger often "buy" peace by giving in to the child's demands. However, giving in tells the child the boundary between his demands and acceptable behavior is meaningless. It also tells the child tantrums work, that he doesn't have to control his anger since things will sort themselves out eventually.

Expect them

If you know temper tantrums can happen and are part of normal childhood development, then you won't be surprised and will be more likely to react in an effective manner.

Keep your cool

Do not let the anger control you.

Remain calm and speak in a calm voice.

One of the best ways children learn is by watching what people around them do. Children are great mimics; it is their specialty. Staying calm when dealing with their anger is a graphic way of showing them how to deal with their emotions.

Help your child label his feeling

Help your child put his feelings into words. For example, "It looks like you are angry. Is there something bugging you? I would like to hear what it is". This sort of approach helps express the anger and initiates dialogue.

Empathize with his anger and frustration

Tell your child you share his feelings: "I understand that you're upset. What would make things better for you?"

Be firm

It is important not to give in to the temptation to buy peace. It is also important to encourage your child to put his feelings into words. This will demonstrate you care about his feelings. He learns that articulating his anger can lead to a satisfactory resolution and this puts him on the path to learning to manage his feelings of anger and frustration. Staying firm and calm gives the child a sense of security.

Avoid overreacting

Not giving special attention to tantrums tells your child that his carrying on doesn't work. He begins to learn there are more effective and acceptable ways of expressing anger and they will be listened to.

Offer a choice

Another useful tactic is to tell the child he has a choice between two alternatives and what the consequences will be in each case. For example, if the tantrum erupts at dinner: "You have a choice: you can calm down and tell us what's bothering you. Or you can continue disrupting our meal and go without dessert."

The most important thing is to give manageable choices and to follow through.

Even consequences that seem slight are effective if applied with consistency.

Persist

When you first begin to apply the strategy of remaining calm and being firm it may seem the tantrums are still lasting an awful long time. Your child is no dummy and is testing the limits you have set to see how far he can go.

Hang in there. The child will learn that you will listen to him and deal with his concerns. In time the frequency and duration of the tantrums will decrease and should eventually become rare.

Praise the child for his good behaviors

Praise your child's good behaviors with your words and actions. A good word and a good cuddle are always welcome.

Try these strategies and observe the consequences. Doing so will help you progress efficiently towards better dealing with your child's anger bursts.

If you have tried these suggestions and would like more ideas or additional support, you might benefit from professional help.

Suggested further reading

If you would you like to know more on this topic and child and adolescent development generally, we recommend the following book:

Vernon, Ann & Al-Mabuk, Rakhi H. *What growing up is all about.* Champaign: Research Press 1995.

La version française de ce document sera disponible sur Internet sous peu. Vous pouvez vous la procurer en composant le 1-800-668-4125.

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