

HOW TO TEMPER A TODDLER'S TANTRUM

If you have a toddler at home, you have probably experienced at least one tantrum, perhaps several. While being in the middle of a toddler's tantrum may elicit some very strong emotions for parents (such as embarrassment, anger, fear, frustration or confusion), it is completely normal behavior for toddlers (12-36 months).

Toddler's tantrums begin in their brains. The human brain has two sides. The right side of the brain uses feelings, symbols, and images. The left side uses logic, reasoning, order, and language. At toddler age, the right side of the brain is more developed than the left. This simply means that a toddler will be able to feel more deeply about something than she will be able to talk or reason about it.

So, if a toddler is unable to play with that toy she wants so badly or have that cupcake for breakfast, she will deeply feel anger or frustration. She may cry, scream or stomp to communicate these feelings. What she cannot do yet is talk about it or understand your attempts to reason with her about it.

Can we prevent tantrums altogether? Well, probably not. Since the job of the adult is to set appropriate limits and the toddler's need is to push limits, there will always be some outbursts of anger or irritation. Can we decrease the number or strength of tantrums? Absolutely. Through respectful communication.

Respectful communication means the adult actively listens to the toddler and acknowledges her feelings. There are three simple steps to respectful communication:

1. First, listen! Really listen to what your toddler is saying and doing. Listen to the words, hear the emotion, read her face, her expression, her gestures. Listen with your ears, eyes and heart. Imagine what it must be like to feel so deeply and not be able to fully understand or fully communicate.
2. Repeat back what you have heard, mirroring your toddler's emotion. Our instinct is to calm a tantrum by saying something like, "I see that you are angry, but you can't have that cupcake right now." However, to your toddler this may feel like you do not understand how upset she really is and may heighten her emotions.

Instead, try saying something like, "Oh you are so mad; so mad that you can't have that cupcake, I know." Use short phrases, repeating the same words three or four times. As you speak, mirror your toddler's emotions in tone and gestures. You do not want to match her emotions, for example you should never scream, but you do want to imitate them a bit so that she knows that you understand how she feels.

For example, think of how you mirror her emotions when she does something wonderful, like the time she took her first steps. You probably did not calmly say, "That was wonderful, sweetheart. I am very proud of you." You may have used those words, but as you said them, you clapped and smiled and laughed and cheered. This is the same idea but with different emotions.

3. Now that your toddler knows you understand how she feels, it is your turn to say what you need to say; to explain and teach, to reassure, to help resolve the problem, or just to give her a big hug.

If you use these three simple steps, you may decrease the length or strength of your toddler's tantrums. But, more importantly, you are teaching her, through your actions, how to care about and care for other people. This is the greatest gift you can give your child.