

TEMPERS IN PRESCHOOL CHILDREN

First, children of all ages (and yes, even adults) can have temper tantrums. They are most common in children ages two through four. When children tantrum they are expressing emotions of anger or frustration through behaviors like screaming, throwing, hitting, crying, etc.

The ability to handle strong emotions requires years of practice and good role models; adults who recognize and talk about their feelings without losing control. Children cannot learn self-control from adults who scream, ridicule or physically harm them in the heat of anger. Children need adults who provide realistic expectations, respect for their feelings and strong, consistent guidance.

Before the Tantrum

It is much easier to prevent tantrums than to deal with them when they are in full swing.

- Give children choices whenever possible. This allows them to feel in control of their lives.
- Notice and point out positive behaviors more often than negative behaviors.
- Make sure your child is well-rested and eating healthy foods.
- Recognize when your child is stressed, anxious, or afraid. Avoid these types of situations.
- Notice how often you say “no.” When a child asks for something or asks to do something, ask yourself “why not?” before you say “no.”
- Give your child many opportunities for free play without adult agendas.

During the Tantrum

A preschool-aged tantrum is like a candle. A candle needs air to burn. You extinguish the flame by depriving it of oxygen. Tantrums use attention for their fuel. You extinguish a tantrum by depriving it of your attention. This can be hard to do when the tantrum comes in the checkout line of the grocery store. But, if you can bear them a few times, ignoring the behavior, you will find that you will have far fewer tantrums to endure in the long run.

- Stay calm. Do not raise your voice or get in an argument with your child. If your child notices that their tantrum has the power to affect you, it will only get worse.
- Similarly, ignore your child’s statements like, “I hate you!” Know that they are not true. They are just your child’s brain, searching for some thing that will affect you to change whatever started the tantrum. The good parent knows to ignore these outbursts, even though their heart may be sending the opposite message.
- Before ignoring, look your child in the eye (if possible) and whisper once, in a low, non-judgemental voice, “You are very upset, I know. It will be okay. Calm down.”
- Make sure to keep your child physically safe by removing any hazards from the area in which the tantrum is occurring. If need be, pick up your child and move her to a safer area, quickly returning to your “ignoring” strategy.
- Now here’s the hardest part: wait it out, appearing unaffected and unruffled. Make sure your own body language and voice tones send the message, “I am calmly waiting for you to finish so that we can continue with our day.”

After the Tantrum

- Once your child is calm and the situation has been resolved, give a small hug.
- Reassure your child that it is okay to be angry, frustrated or afraid and that you love him no matter what.
- Without judgement, explain that kicking, screaming, etc. are never okay.
- Teach your child what the appropriate behavior is; what she should do the next time she wants something.

Always remember how much your child craves your loving attention and what a powerful role model you are in your child’s life. What you say and do before, during and after a tantrum can have a tremendous impact in helping your child learn to understand, accept and express his emotions throughout the course of his life.