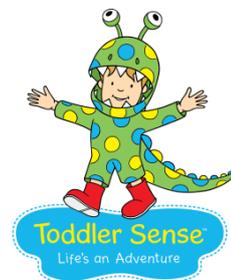


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## Toddler - Tantrums

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Tantrums are the most common behavioural problem in children between the ages of 18 months and three years. They are also a normal part of development.

Some toddlers have regular tantrums, while others experience them less frequently. Tantrum prevalence generally increases up to three years of age and declines when the child goes to school. Children with strong wills and high emotions are more likely to fall into tantrum behaviour than those with milder temperaments.

Tantrum behaviour varies greatly in children. Reactions may vary from a full-blown screaming, hitting, kicking, pushing, and pulling outburst to a milder response that includes whining or crying. Some toddlers have one tantrum per month while others have as many as six per day. Duration can vary from less than one minute to more than 40 minutes.

Tantrums can provide an opportunity for parents and practitioners to observe the events that lead up to the behaviour, and then find ways of dealing with them. Parents and practitioners can also help toddlers develop self-control skills, which will enable them to manage their emotions in a positive way.

### Development

In the second year, the brain undergoes rapid development. The frontal lobes associated with speech and language mature, and vocabulary becomes more expressive. In the third year, the medial-temporal lobes undergo rapid change, and toddlers gain more control of their emotions. However, communication between these important brain structures remains limited. This is one reason why toddlers have difficulty in expressing themselves verbally and why they have rapid mood swings.

Genetic inheritance, health and environmental influences also play a role in emotional behaviour. Some children are more prone to temperamental qualities such as stubbornness, determination, and persistence than others. However, these qualities can be beneficial to their intellectual and creative development.

Health problems or developmental delays can also drive an emotional outburst. Toddlers with speech or hearing impairments may throw tantrums due to the lack of communication skills and frustration in getting their needs understood.

Tantrums are very often the result of stored anxieties or emotions. Some children find it difficult to adjust to new events such as starting nursery school, moving to a new house or the birth of a new sibling. Waking in the night, thumb-sucking, and prickly behaviour during the day may suggest that the toddler has stored emotions that are difficult to manage.

Diet is another factor that can affect mood swings. Low blood glucose levels can affect the child's ability to exercise self-control in difficult situations. If glucose is restored to a sufficient level, self-control typically improves. An inadequate intake of protein can also trigger a tantrum. Protein stimulates production of the hormone glucagon, which raises blood-sugar levels and helps to maintain a normal environment for body cells.

Toddlers may also assert their independence if their boundaries are too tight or too restrictive. They may express anger and frustration if the rules and guidelines that they are expected to follow are inconsistent or unfair. Parental problems such as financial difficulties, marital stress, depression, and illness can also bring on an emotional outburst. If the toddler's emotional needs are not met for a sustained period, anger may be directed at the people closest to them. When the adult retaliates, toddlers get the attention that they need.

Curiosity and the desire for independence and control can also bring on a temper tantrum. Curiosity for example, drives the toddler to explore the china cupboard. When the parent removes the child and says "No", the child reacts with an angry outburst.

### **Tantrum triggers**

Whenever something interferes with the child's attempt to master a skill or gain independence, or whenever the environment becomes too stressful or frustrating, the chances of an emotional outburst increase.

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Tantrums can also be triggered by:

- Tiredness
- Hunger
- Boredom
- Lack of physical activity
- Staying indoors too long
- Negative criticism
- Adult inattentiveness
- Lack of affection or belonging
- Pressure to do something that they are not mentally ready for
- Frustration at being misunderstood
- Unwanted interference in an activity
- Frustration at being unable to accomplish a task
- Finishing an activity before they are ready
- Not understanding what is wanted
- Frustration at being denied something that is wanted
- Separation from the parent
- Lack of an attachment bond to the parent or keyworker

The absence of any one of the above may lead to a tantrum as toddlers struggle to cope with their emotions.

### **Managing tantrums**

Some toddlers will accept being held close during a tantrum, while others will avoid any form of restraint. The coping strategy of some toddlers is to flail their arms and legs and writhe about on the floor until they calm down and regain composure.

Arguing, remonstrating, screaming, or getting angry will only escalate and prolong the outburst. Isolating children is also not good practice, but calmly moving them to a safe place where they can blow off steam can help to defuse the situation. Anything that could be broken or could harm the toddler should be removed from the room.

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Sadness and reparation are emotions frequently presented at the end of a tantrum. A physical hug provides reassurance and comfort. It also promotes trust in the adult, which provides good emotional stability.

### **Planning ahead**

Knowing what triggers a tantrum can help to avoid it. For example, if toddlers have a tantrum when they are asked to put their toys away, advance warning will give them the chance to wind down before the end of play.

If toddlers are fed and rested when they are taken shopping and given an active part to play, they will be less likely to get bored and frustrated.

If the adult expects to be tied up on the telephone, or their attention is likely to be diverted for a period, it helps to plan activities that will keep the toddler busy. Constructive or mechanical toys, colouring or dough will capture interest and reduce the likelihood of an emotional outburst.

### **Self-control**

Some circumstances can limit self-control. For example, if aggressive behaviour is encouraged at home, if children see hitting behaviour or they suffer abuse, it can be difficult for them to learn what is and what is not acceptable. If tolerance and patience are not encouraged at home, these qualities will be much harder to teach in the early years setting.

If we suppress their feelings by encouraging them not to cry or we distract them, so they will not have an upset, their fears go underground, where powerful feelings cause trouble. When a big wave of sudden (or stored) tension, anxiety, tiredness, jealousy, frustration, or fear suddenly floods the toddler's brain, there are big feelings that need to be released.

Most children improve their ability to communicate, become increasingly independent, and learn to handle their emotions before they go to school. However, if they continue to have tantrums and have problems in getting along with other people at school, they may need professional help. Early intervention can make all the difference.

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## **Emotional security**

Parents and practitioners, who talk to toddlers, spend time with them and praise and encourage the things that they do, equip them to handle moments of frustration and anger.

The following techniques can be helpful in raising self-esteem confidence and motivation and provide good emotional stability.

- A regular and predictable routine that consists of rest and active play.
- Giving the toddler undivided attention at different times of the day.
- Where possible, refraining from asking 'Why?' questions. Toddlers are unable to provide an adequate answer, which increases frustration.
- Steering clear of the 'No' word, which implies failure when the toddler is trying to do something right.
- Avoiding telling toddlers that they are being silly when they complain or feel scared about something. Instead, help them to come to terms with their fears by talking about what has happened and offer reassurance.
- Establishing clear and realistic guidelines.
- Being consistent, so that toddlers know what to expect and where they stand.
- Making compromises. For example, if the toddler does not want to put on a coat, compromise by leaving the zip undone.
- Involving toddlers in everyday activities from helping with the laundry, to washing dishes and preparing food.
- Using signs to communicate.
- Providing opportunities for emotional overload from climbing and jumping to dance and walking.
- Encouraging toddlers to draw how they feel.
- Enabling them to make choices.
- Offering reassurance and comfort when they need it.

## **Summary**

Temper tantrums are the result of complex interactions between the two hemispheres of the brain, temperament, and the environment. As toddlers acquire

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communication skills and they are more able to manage their emotions, they will develop acceptable patterns of behaviour.

Factors such as tiredness, boredom, hunger, jealousy, or lack of attention may result in uncooperative behaviour or an emotional outburst. If parents and practitioners know what the triggers are, and they can read the child's body language and verbal cues, they will be able to minimize conditions that trigger a tantrum.

A warm, caring, and loving environment plays an important role in the development of emotional skills. If adults are loving, fair and consistent in their expectations, and they stay in control of their emotions, they can manage an explosive outburst.

Until toddlers learn to manage their emotions, tantrums will still erupt from time to time. However, if tantrums persist beyond the age of five years and become violent, aggressive, or disturbing, they may signal serious problems. The needs of these children need to be addressed for them to grow up into happy, healthy adults.

**Further reading:**

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