

# Temper Tantrums

It's hard for a young child to hold strong feelings inside. Young children often cry, scream, or stomp up and down when they are upset. As a parent, you may feel angry, helpless, or ashamed.

Temper tantrums are normal. They are one way a child learns self-control. Almost all children have tantrums between the ages of 1 and 3. By age 4, they usually stop.

## What to Do for a Temper Tantrum

Try these tips when your child has a temper tantrum:

- **Try to stay calm.** *If you can't stay calm, leave the room.* Wait a minute or two before coming back, or wait until the crying stops.
- **Distract your child.** Point out something else to do, like read a book or play with a toy. Say something like, "Look at what the kitty is doing."
- **Let your child cool off or have a "time-out."** Take your child away from the problem. Give your child some time alone to calm down. Try 1 minute of time-out for every year of your child's age. (For example, a 4-year-old would get a 4-minute time-out.) Don't use time-out too much or it won't work.
- **Be ready to take your child home if your child has a "public" tantrum.** The best way of stopping "public" tantrums is to take your child home or to the car.
- **Ignore your child's crying, screaming, or kicking if you can.** Stand nearby or hold your child without talking until your child calms down. The more attention you give a tantrum, the more likely it is to happen again.

The following things are *not* OK. Don't ignore these actions:

- Hitting or kicking people
- Throwing things that might hurt someone or break something
- Yelling for a long time



If your child does these things, take him or her away from the problem. Hold your child. Say firmly, "No hitting" or "No throwing" to make sure your child knows what behavior is not OK.

## What Not to Do

**Never punish your child for temper tantrums.**

Your child may start to keep feelings inside, which is worse.

**Don't give in to your child's demands just to stop a tantrum.** This teaches that a temper tantrum will help your child get his or her way. Tantrums are more likely to stop if your child doesn't gain anything from them.

**Don't talk too much to your child during the tantrum.** It is hard to reason with a screaming child. When your child calms down, talk about better ways to deal with anger and frustration.

## What to Expect

Your child should have fewer temper tantrums by age 3 1/2. Between tantrums, he or she should seem normal and healthy. Every child grows and learns at his or her own pace. It may take time to learn how to control his or her temper.

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### A Word About Safety

Sometimes you have to say “no” to protect your child from harm. This is a common cause of a tantrum. So, what can you do?

- Childproof your home as much as you can.
- Make dangerous places and things off-limits.
- Keep an eye on your child at all times. Never leave small children alone, especially if there may be danger.
- Take away anything dangerous right away. Give your child something safe in its place.
- Be clear and firm about safety rules.

### Call the Doctor If...

...your child shows any of these signs:

- Hurts himself or herself or others during tantrums
- Holds his or her breath and faints
- The tantrums get worse after age 4
- Has lots of other behavior problems

When tantrums are bad or happen often, they may be a sign of emotional problems. Your child’s doctor can help you find out what is behind the tantrums. The doctor can also give you advice on dealing with them.



## How to Help Prevent Tantrums

You can’t prevent *all* tantrums, but these ideas may help:

- **Make sure you give your child enough attention.** Children try to get attention in many ways. If being good doesn’t do it, they may try being bad. To children, even “negative” attention (when you are upset) is better than none at all. So notice your child being good and reward the behavior.
- **Set limits that make sense.** Give simple reasons for the rules you set, and don’t change the rules.
- **Keep a daily routine** as much as you can. This helps your child know what to expect.
- **Let your child make choices whenever you can.** For example, “Do you want apple juice or orange juice?” Or let’s say your child doesn’t want to take a bath. Make it clear that he or she will be taking a bath. But offer a real choice he or she can make. Try saying, “It’s time for your bath. Would you like to walk or have me carry you?”
- **Try not to say “no” too much.** Choose your battles. Children need to have some feeling of control.
- **Give your child a few minutes’ warning before changing activities.** This helps children get ready for a change.
- **Ask your child to use words to tell you how he or she is feeling.** Suggest words he or she can use to describe those feelings. For example, “I’m really mad.”
- **Be ready with healthy snacks when your child gets hungry.**
- **Make sure your child gets enough rest.**
- **Set a good example.** Try not to argue or yell in front of your child.

To learn more, visit the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) Web site at [www.aap.org](http://www.aap.org).

Your child’s doctor will tell you to do what’s best for your child. This information should not take the place of talking with your child’s doctor.

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