

Temper Tantrums and Your Young Child

Knowing how to deal with your child when he or she becomes stubborn, does not listen to you and throws a temper tantrum is important. Use the following information to learn how to effectively handle your child's temper tantrums.

Coping Strategies

Here are a few strategies for coping with a young child who chooses to be difficult.

- **Choose your battles.** Do not quibble excessively over trivial matters, like insisting that your resistant child wear the baseball hat you bought her to the baseball game.
- **Be consistent.** Set a routine for going to bed, for instance, and stick to it to avoid sending a mixed signal.
- **Communicate your reasons why and stress positive consequences.** Tell your child why you are asking him or her to pick up his or her toys. Smile and consider saying something like, "We like to pick up our toys because we want the house to look nice for when all of our friends come over."
- **Try tackling fears calmly.** Do not force your child to confront something he or she is afraid of, and do not ridicule or scold if he or she does not. Instead, be reassuring that his or her fear is not so scary. For example, you might pet the neighbor's dog that he or she fears and show that the animal is friendly. Promote independence by not carrying your child when he or she is shy or unsure about other people.
- **Do not lose your composure.** Demonstrate to your child that you are in control. Remember that your child is not trying to be bad; chances are he or she is seeking attention.
- **Remain calm.** Children learn early that their outbursts can control parents, so it is important to try to remain calm, cool and collected.
- **Model appropriately.** Set a good example and do not contradict yourself. For example, if you have set a house rule of not eating sweets before dinner, stick to it yourself.
- **Make reasonable requests.** Ask yourself: Is your child developmentally ready to do what you have asked, or are your expectations too high?

Discipline Positively

Every child disobeys and throws a fit sooner or later. Instead of punishing or physically reprimanding your child, practice these methods:

- **Express your expectations clearly and firmly.** Continue to politely ask your child to do what you have asked. Try to keep your requests short and succinct so that your child will not tune you out.
- **Follow through with positive incentives and natural consequences.** Without bribing your child, give an incentive to do what you have asked. For example, promise to read a book if your child gets in bed on time. If he or she does not listen, pick the child up gently, put him or her in bed, and convey that if instructions were followed, you would have had time to read a story. It will be hard, but do not give in to cries of protest.
- **Try distractions or games.** To curb whining, get your child to focus on something else. "Look, there is a squirrel outside the window!" If he or she fights taking a bath, ask your child to pretend to be a duck. It sounds a little silly, but it often it works.
- **Withdraw your attention.** If you sense weeping or continued whining, do not reward the behavior with attention. Continue to supervise your child's behavior from a distance for a short while.
- **Practice using body language instead of your voice.** If asking your child to do something does not work, some experts recommend saying nothing to correct a child's behavior. Instead, practice restraint while demonstrating firmness and seriousness with your body. Focus a steady, but expressionless gaze on your child, keep your lips closed, and do not smile. Crouch or bend down to the child's level and continue to yield a stone face that indicates your displeasure with her behavior. However, note that this technique may not work well for young children.
- **Try the two chances rule.** Follow through with consequences after the second time you have asked your child to do something, and be consistent with this pattern. If your child thinks you might back down or change your mind, they will not listen the first time.

- **Count to three.** For example, if your child will not stop jumping on the bed, tell him or her that you will count to three, and if the jumping does not stop, you will remove him or her from the room. If you follow through after counting to three, your child will quickly learn that you mean what you say.
- **Enforce time-outs.** This can be especially effective when your child is hurting another child. Take him or her to a room where the child must sit quietly. Timeouts should be age-based due to attention span and ability to understand the passage of time. For example, two-year-old children should get a two-minute time-out. Three-year-olds can handle three minutes of sitting quietly, etc.
- **Try whispering.** If toddler throws a screaming tantrum, especially in a public place, speak softly to him or her in language that is understandable. "I know you wanted that toy, but it is not ours. It is not easy when you cannot have what you want." Calmly remove your child from the situation and do not bring him or her back until he or she is quiet.
- **Avoid bargaining and bribing.** Do not let your child compromise your request or whittle down your demand. Never bribe a child to do what you have asked. And do not give rewards like candy or toys for simply doing what you asked in the first place. Instead, reward with a praising remark or a "Thank you, you did a good job and I appreciate what you have done."
- **Be consistent.** Find an approach that works and stick to it.

Children are constantly learning about their world. Tantrums are often an expression of their need for affection. While it is important to enforce rules, it is also important to reassure your child that you understand her frustration and that, no matter what, you always love her. Try holding and hugging your child, even after an outburst, to reinforce the important bond you have.

Resources

- Family Guide: <http://family.samhsa.gov>
- National Institute of Mental Health: www.nimh.nih.gov