

Understanding and Responding to Temper Tantrums

Dr. John Biever, child psychiatrist, emphasizes the importance of seeing the world from the child's point of view to understand how and why temper tantrums are a normal and even necessary part of child development. He points out that when the child is an infant, his or her every need is met. Then all of sudden, when the child is a toddler, adults start saying no to demands or otherwise fail to meet the child's expectations. The obvious solution, from the child's point of view, is to throw a tantrum!



Situations and circumstances when tantrums can occur

- The child doesn't have the language to describe his or her needs and wants.
- The child is thirsty, hungry, or tired.
- The child feels neglected and wants/needs attention.
- The child is frustrated because he or she isn't yet able to do something for him or herself.

Principles to keep in mind when responding to tantrums

(courtesy of Dr. Biever)

- Remember that a tantrum suggests that the child feels safe enough in the adult's presence to express his or her feelings; this is a good thing!
- Avoid one-fits-all responses to tantrums; instead use techniques suiting the child's and your unique style.

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- Don't either reward the child or crush his or her will; figure out a way to empathize with the child's wish.
 - Remember that for the young child, everything is "here and now;" the future does not exist.
 - Match the child's intensity, but not the rage.
 - Create a safe environment so the child can play without your having to place limits all the time.
 - Explain your expectations for behavior before going somewhere new.
 - Create a timeout space where the child can calm down.
 - Avoid situations that are likely to trigger tantrums (like the candy aisle at the grocery store).
 - Be consistent with daily routines and how you enforce rules and expectations.
- Additional tips for preventing and responding to tantrums**
- Reward the child with positive rather than negative attention.
 - Don't ask the child whether he or she wants to do something when the child must do it (e.g., go to bed).
 - On the other hand, give choices so the child has some control over things in his or her life.
 - Choose your battles; don't make big issues out of small things.

R E S O U R C E S

Manage Challenging Behaviors resources. PA's Promise for Children.
<http://bit.ly/2Y08Y7r>

Temper tantrums in toddlers: How to keep the peace. Mayo Clinic.
<https://mayoclinic.org/217LJGc>

Temper Tantrums: Guidelines for Parents. Robert G. Harrington, PhD.
<http://bit.ly/2ncQVcw>

Programs and families can contact the program leadership directly at PAIECMH@pakeys.org with questions or concerns.

