

GROWING UP

Dealing with the Terrible Temper Tantrums

By Dan Florell, Ph.D. & Praveena Salins, M.D.

The mother could tell it was about to begin. She had just told her two year-old that she could not have a cookie. The two year-old's face was beginning to turn red. She was starting to open her mouth where a howling, high-pitched screech came out with the words, "I want it!" The girl proceeded to continue screaming and stomping her feet. The mother is beginning to wonder if these frequent temper tantrums are normal and if so, will they ever go away?

Temper tantrums are never easy to deal with, especially when it is your darling little one that is throwing the tantrum. The good news is that temper tantrums in young children is a normal part of development and will typically go away in time. Temper tantrums are a sign that toddlers are becoming more independent and they want the world to know it. However, they only have limited ways of displaying their wants and needs. This usually consists of basic words like "no" and behavioral outbursts. Temper tantrums tend to start around 18 months of age, worsen between the ages of two to three years old, and then lessen by the age of four years old. By the age of four, most children have sufficient language skills so that they are better able to communicate their wants and needs through words versus actions.

While it is comforting to know that temper tantrums will eventually fade, there are still a couple of years in which parents need to deal with them. When a tantrum does occur, it is important to stay calm and see how the tantrum progresses as they are often short-lived. Ignoring minor displays of anger such as crying, screaming, and kicking can also shorten the duration of the tantrums. Other times distraction like changing the child's location can prevent a tantrum. However there are some behaviors that are not okay and should not be ignored. This includes hitting or kicking people, throwing things that might hurt others, or screaming or yelling for long periods of time. If any of these behaviors occur, take the child away from the problem and say firmly, "No hitting" or "No yelling" to ensure the child knows the behaviors are not okay.

Of course prevention can be the most satisfying approach to temper tantrums. One technique is to encourage the child to use words to tell how he is feeling. Another technique is to set reasonable limits and not expect the child to be perfect. A third technique is to keep a daily routine as much as possible so the child knows what to expect. Finally, give the child choices such as asking whether they want to eat their goldfish or drink their juice. It is harder for the child to get upset when they have some choices.

There are some children who continue to tantrum regularly past four years old. If the tantrums are severe or happen too often, it could be a sign of early emotional problems. If this is the case, consult with a pediatrician or child psychologist about the issue.

Biography:

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