

7 Ways to Deal With a Toddler's Tantrum

While setting boundaries, we also need to show some love

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What Can We Do?

I recently wrote about why we should be grateful when our little ones throw a tantrum. But aside from understanding that a tantrum is normal and even healthy, what else can we do when we're actually in this kind of high-stress moment with our kids? I don't believe parents should ignore a tantrum. When children are truly out of control, that's when they need us the most. We still need to set clear boundaries, but our response should always be full of love, respect and patience.

Here are seven suggestions for dealing with a toddler's tantrum:

Pay Attention to Triggers

Sometimes we can notice times when our kids are more reactive and stop a tantrum before it actually begins. So watch for signs like tiredness or hunger. The more proactive you can be, addressing problems before they upset your child, the more you can avoid the full-blown meltdown.

Connect Emotionally

The temptation, when your child is upset, is to immediately correct the behavior. Resist this temptation. When your child is emotionally out of control, he's not ready—or even able—to think about acting differently. First, he needs you to respond to his big feelings and help him calm down. Then, when he's able to hear you and think about what you're saying, you can address the misbehavior and talk about more appropriate expressions of his emotions.

Set Boundaries

Kids need boundaries, even when they're upset. But we can hold the line and still provide lots of empathy and validation of the desires and feelings behind our child's behavior. You might say, "I know you really want another popsicle, but I'm not going to change my mind. It's OK to cry and be sad. I'm here to comfort you even though you can't have the popsicle." Or if your child refuses to leave the park, you can say, "We have to go now, so I'll sing the A-B-C song while you finish swinging, but when the song is over, we will be going." If you have to gently pick her up while she yells, do it calmly. Then it's fine to try to turn her attention to something else interesting, or let her continue to cry; just be a calm presence and continue to offer her comfort.

Use Playfulness

Humor is a powerful tool when a child is upset. Talk in a silly voice. Fall down or try some other form of slapstick. Leaving the park is a lot more fun if you get to chase Mom to the car. Being playful is a great way to break through your child's bubble of high emotion, so you can then help him gain control of himself.

Be Flexible

Since each child and each moment is different, there's no script for how to best calm a child. So don't be rigid in your strategy. In fact, sometimes it's fine to actually give in to your child's requests. For example, you might say, "Maybe it would be helpful to wait to put on your jammies. Let's nurse first for a few minutes, and then we'll put on the jammies." That way, you're responding to your child, and you're still requiring that she put on the pajamas, but you're being flexible about the terms. It's even fine, in some circumstances, to let her fall asleep and put the pajamas on afterward. The point is to avoid rigidly holding on to one way of doing things. Parenting requires constant flexibility. Realize that you can still be in charge, while letting your child have a say in how things go at times.

Remain Calm

I love that British poster from World War II that reads, “Keep Calm and Carry On.” That’s not a bad mantra to have at the ready when your child goes ballistic. I know it’s hard, but try not to match his emotional intensity with your own. Remember that he’s only a small child with a limited capacity to control his own emotions and body. Your job is to be the adult in the relationship, and carry on as the parent. How you respond to your child’s tantrum will greatly impact just how unpleasant the whole scene has to become.

Always Repair

You’re going to make mistakes when emotions run high, and say things you wish you hadn’t. You’re human, and you’re not perfect. So after you’ve messed up, remind yourself what matters most—your relationship with your child—and make things right with her. Hold her. Apologize if necessary. Laugh together. The sooner she knows that everything’s back to normal between you two, the quicker the relationship can begin to grow and deepen again.

Be a Shelter

Remember, tantrums are like storms. They can be intense, but they’ll blow on through. Your job is be a shelter during the storm, nurturing your child and offering lots of love, comfort, respect and patience.