

Handling Tantrums

Children are more likely to have tantrums between the ages of 2 and 5, and at any time when they are thirsty, hungry, tired, frustrated, or stressed.

All tantrums happen because a child feels overwhelmed by emotion. Sometimes a child is hugely frustrated by a limit and wants things to be different. Do not back away from a limit because you fear a tantrum. Let it be worked through. Other times a child feels overwhelmed in a non-specific way. Once they reach a threshold beyond which they can't hold themselves together anymore, the energy must be released somehow. If they don't have the words to express their big feelings a tantrum might result. No matter how insignificant the cause might seem to us remember that it was basically the last straw for them.

Children more often have tantrums with their parents than with anyone else because they feel safest with their parents. They hold themselves together until they can't do it anymore and release their emotions when they feel safe.

What to do when a tantrum happens:

- Make sure the area is safe to thrash in. Move your child if you can't make the area safe or if you need to move to a more private place. Restrict your child if necessary to keep them from hurting themselves, other people or property. Only touch your child if you absolutely must, because touch seems to make tantrums escalate.
- Take a breath. Remember that this is normal behavior for young children and not a statement about you or anything you do as a parent.
- Calmly say what you think your child might be feeling. Then stop talking and stay close by as a calm and loving presence while your child feels powerless to control what is happening.
- As the tantrum starts to wind down, your child might want to be held. Hold without talking for as long as wanted and needed. If the tantrum started because your child was tired, he or she might actually fall asleep in your arms.
- If the tantrum was about being frustrated with a limit, the limit still stands.
- After the tantrum is over it's over. No discussion, no lecture, no shaming, no moral of the story, no minimizing or trying to fix their feelings, no talking about your own feelings (which are ok for you to have but not discuss at this moment). Everyone moves on.

Tantrums are hard to get through, for both children and parents. When a child has a tantrum and is cared for in this way their trust in us deepens over time because they know that we accept and love them when they are showing us their most difficult behaviors.