

How to Handle Tantrums and Meltdowns

Tips for helping children learn better ways to express powerful emotions

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The first thing we have to do to manage [tantrums is to understand them](#). That is not always as easy as it sounds, since tantrums and meltdowns are generated by a lot of different things: fear, frustration, anger, sensory overload, to name a few. And since a tantrum isn't a very clear way to communicate (even though it may be a powerful way to get attention), parents are often in the dark about what's driving the behavior.

It's useful to think of a tantrum [as a reaction to a situation](#) a child can't handle in a more grown-up way—say, by talking about how he feels, or making a case for what he wants, or just doing what he's been asked to do. Instead he is overwhelmed by emotion. And if unleashing his feelings in a dramatic way — crying, yelling, kicking the floor, punching the wall, or hitting a parent — serves to get him what he wants (or out of whatever he was trying to avoid), it's a behavior that he may come to rely on.

The first step is to get a picture of what triggers your particular child's tantrums.

That doesn't mean that tantrums are consciously willful, or even voluntary. But it does mean that they're a learned response. So the goal with a child prone to tantrums is to help him unlearn this response, and instead learn other, more mature ways to handle a problem situation, like compromising, or complying with parental expectations in exchange for some positive reward.

Make an assessment

The first step is to get a picture of what triggers your particular child's tantrums. Mental health professionals call this a "functional assessment," which means looking at what real-life situations seem to generate tantrums — specifically, at what happens immediately before, during, and after the outbursts that might contribute to their happening again.

Sometimes a close look at the pattern of a child's tantrums reveals a problem that needs attention: [a traumatic experience](#), [abuse](#) or neglect, [social anxiety](#), [ADHD](#), or a [learning disorder](#). When children are prone to meltdowns [beyond the age in which they are typical](#), it's often a symptom of distress that they are struggling to manage. That effort breaks down at moments that require self-discipline they don't yet have, like transitioning from something they enjoy to something that's difficult for them.

"A majority of kids who have frequent meltdowns do it in very predictable, circumscribed situations: when it's [homework time](#), [bedtime](#), [time to stop playing](#)," explains Dr. Vasco Lopes, a clinical psychologist. "The trigger is usually being asked to do something that's aversive to them or to stop doing something that is fun for them. Especially for children who have ADHD, something that's not stimulating and requires them to control their physical activity, [like a long car ride](#) or a religious service or [visiting an elderly relative](#), is a common trigger for meltdowns."

Learned behavior

Since parents often find tantrums impossible to tolerate—especially in public—the child may learn implicitly that throwing a tantrum can help him get his way. It becomes a conditioned response. "Even if it only works five

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out of 10 times that they tantrum, that intermittent reinforcement makes it a very solid learned behavior,” Dr. Lopes adds. “So they’re going to continue that behavior in order to get what they want.”

One of the goals of the functional assessment is to see if some tantrum triggers might be eliminated or changed so they’re not as problematic for the child. “If putting on the child’s shoes or [leaving for school](#) is the trigger, obviously we can’t make it go away,” explains Dr. Steven Dickstein, who is both a pediatrician and child and adolescent psychiatrist. But sometimes we can change the way parents and other caregivers handle a situation — to defuse it. This could translate into giving kids more warning that a task is required of them, or structuring problematic activities in ways that reduce the likelihood of a tantrum.

“Anticipating those triggers, and modifying them so that it’s easier for the child to engage in that activity is really important,” says Dr. Lopes. “For example, if [homework](#) is really difficult for a child, because she has underlying attention, organization or learning issues, she might have outbursts right before she’s supposed to start her homework. So we say to parents, ‘How can we make doing homework more palatable for her?’ We can give her frequent breaks, support her in areas she has particular difficulty with, organize her work, and break intimidating tasks into smaller chunks.”

Another goal is to consider whether the expectations for the child’s behavior are [developmentally appropriate](#). Dr. Dickstein notes, for his age and his particular level of maturity. “Can we modify the environment to make it match the child’s abilities better, and foster development towards maturing?”

It’s important for parents to understand two things: first of all, avoiding a tantrum before it begins does not mean “giving in” to a child’s demands. It means separating the unwanted tantrum response from other issues, such as compliance with parental requests. And second, by reducing the likelihood of a tantrum response, you are also taking away the opportunity for reinforcement of that response. When kids don’t tantrum, they learn to deal with needs, desires, and setbacks in a more mature way, and that learning itself reinforces appropriate responses. Fewer tantrums now means...fewer tantrums later.

Responding to tantrums

When tantrums occur, the parent or caregiver’s response affects the likelihood of the behavior happening again. There are lots of very specific protocols to help parents respond consistently, in ways that will minimize tantrum behavior later. They range from Ross Greene’s seminal approach, [Collaborative & Proactive Solutions](#), to step-by-step [parent-training programs](#) like Parent-Child Interaction Therapy and Parent Management Training. They have in common the starting point that parents resist the temptation to end the tantrum by giving the child what he wants when he tantrums. For outbursts that aren’t dangerous, the goal is to ignore the behavior, to withdraw all parental attention, since even negative attention like reprimanding or trying to persuade the child to stop has been found positively reinforce the behavior.

Attention is withheld from behavior you want to discourage, and lavished instead on behaviors you want to encourage: when a child makes an effort to calm down or, instead of tantruming, complies or proposes a compromise. “By positively reinforcing compliance and appropriate responses to frustration,” says Dr. Lopes, “you’re teaching skills and—since you can’t comply with a command and tantrum at the same time—simultaneously decreasing that aggressive noncompliant tantrum behavior.”

One thing you don’t want to do is try to reason with a child who is upset. As Dr. Dickstein puts it, “Don’t talk to the kid when he’s not available.” You want to encourage a child to practice at negotiation when he’s not [blowing up](#), and you’re not either. You may need to teach techniques for working through problems, break them down step by step for kids who are immature or have deficits in this kind of thinking and communication.

Modeling calm behavior

And you need to model the kind of negotiation you want your child to learn. “Parents should take time outs, too,” notes Dr. Dickstein. “When you get really angry you need to just take yourself out of the situation. You can’t problem solve when you’re upset—your IQ drops about 30 percent when you are angry.”

[Being calm and clear](#) about behavioral expectations is important because it helps you communicate more effectively with a child. “So it’s not, ‘You need to behave today,’” Dr. Lopes says. “It’s, ‘You need to be seated during mealtime, with your hands to yourself, and saying only positive words.’ Those are very observable, concrete things that the child knows what’s expected and that the parent can reinforce with [praise](#) and rewards.”

Both you and your child need to build what Dr. Dickstein calls a toolkit for [self-soothing](#), things you can do to calm down, like slow breathing, to relax, because you can’t be calm and angry at the same time. There are lots of techniques, he adds, but “The nice thing about breathing is it’s always available to you.”

Calm Voices, Calmer Kids

Sometimes it’s hard to keep your cool, but less yelling means better communication

Before hopping aboard the roller coaster ride called parenthood, people sans kids have likely witnessed exasperated moms and dads losing it in Aisle 5 and thought smugly, “I’m never going to yell at my kids.”

And then they have families of their own and reality sets in. For as their munchkins reach each much-anticipated [developmental milestone](#), they acquire some less desirable skills as well. So a 2-year-old who “scribbles spontaneously” may very well exhibit her newfound talent all over freshly painted walls and prized furniture, while emerging language allows her to repeat certain choice words again and again, including the ever-popular [“No!”](#)

Parents know that in the midst of the mayhem, staying calm (aka not yelling) is a golden rule. But unless you’re made of stone, it’s pretty tough to maintain a measured tone when you’re dealing with kids day in and day out. When parents yell, “they’ve lost it,” says Dr. Steven G. Dickstein, a child and adolescent psychiatrist. “They’re overwhelmed with anger or frustration.”

There are very few situations that merit yelling, other than when a child is doing something dangerous or harmful. Yet “I don’t think there’s a parent who hasn’t yelled,” says Alice Long, who blogs at Mother L about son D, 3, and daughter Em, 2. “This will happen. Let it go.”

So why is it so important to be firm — without raising your voice?

What’s wrong with yelling?

- Upping the ante, losing the message: Yelling often fails to get the point across because emotions can overcome the message. It will also likely escalate the situation, and the child’s aggression, be it verbal or physical.
- Heard it all before: If parents yell all the time, Dr. Dickstein notes, “kids may either shut down or ignore it because it’s nothing new.” Adds Kara Gebhart Uhl, a mother of three and the blogger behind Pleiades Bee, “Sometimes, a whispered ‘I’m very disappointed with your actions’ is much more startling to a child than a screaming rant.”
- Hard on self-esteem: We know that yelling and harsh parenting are associated with lower [self-esteem](#) for kids, and can affect their performance in school. Kids who are the object of verbal aggression are [at risk for aggressive or disruptive behavior](#). Dr. Dickstein cautions that when mom or dad yells, kids may feel the parent doesn’t “love them or even like them” and can only criticize.
- Missing out on the positive: When yelling is the chronic mode of communication, both children and parents are missing out on the chance to form positive, affectionate bonds. And for kids predisposed to [anxiety](#) and [depression](#), internalizing these negative interactions may be the tipping point.
- You feel bad, too: Meanwhile, [blowouts can leave parents feeling guilty, frustrated and demoralized](#). Adults who express anger in negative ways increase their chronic stress, which contributes to health problems.

Why calmer is better?

Addressing inappropriate behavior calmly enables you to focus on teaching the child what's problematic about his behavior, and following through with effective consequences.

- Modeling behavior is major: When parents practice healthy self-regulation, it helps kids learn how to [self-regulate themselves](#). Mom Regina Myers testifies that when she turns the volume way down, her “teenager responds much better and yells less himself!”
- Kids feel safer. The best style of parenting features “a high degree of nurturing, firm but kind,” says clinical psychologist Melanie Fernandez. As much as children and teens may act like they want control, what really makes them feel safe are calm, consistent, fair authority figures. (There's a reason why some parents look to Dog Whisperer [Cesar Millan for child-rearing tips](#). After all, good parents must be leaders of their pack, um, family.)

If you work on specific strategies that help yourself feel calmer, you can help your children learn to regulate better.

Tips for Parents

Identify problem interactions: Pinpoint the recurring problems that frequently set you and your kids off. If [getting out the door for school in the morning](#) is a chronic issue, solutions might include laying out their clothes and showering the night before, or everyone waking up a bit earlier. Try to break it down into steps you can tackle calmly

Create consistency: With younger kids, it helps to create a set routine with [simple, one-step directions](#) that could include visual aids, not to mention plenty of labeled praise and rewards.

Consider triggers: Being aware of the context of the behavior allows for calmer responses. If [we recognize when a child is cranky](#) because he missed his snack or is overtired, it can be easier to temper our own frayed feelings.

Understanding = patience: It's also important for parents to know and understand their children's capabilities, since this can help them become more patient. Understanding her son's issues — he was diagnosed with [sensory processing disorder](#) — was “a game changer” for Long. You can become calmer, she says, when you “accept kids as they are, love them as they are, and recognize that half the problem is how you react.”

Time management: Trying to do too much causes stress. “The times I lose it are the times when I'm already overtaxing myself,” Long says. “The time to do bills is not when the kids are at the table doing an art project.” She notes that parents trying to multi-task increases the risk of kids misbehaving. “Just be there with your kids; it's less likely they'll throw their breakfast on the floor.”

Count to 10: All the parents interviewed for this article had one key piece of advice: Take a break and breathe. It's important to recognize when you're about to lose control so you can step away from the situation, even leaving the room when you can do it safely. (A mom who tells her child she's taking a time out is [modeling self-calming behavior](#).) “I'm not a yeller,” Uhl says. “But when I feel myself becoming hot with frustration and I hear myself getting louder and louder, I stop, check myself, take a deep breath and start over.”

Disengage: Actively [ignoring problem behaviors](#) is another strategy that helps stop parents from yelling. If you disengage from the situation until you regain your composure, you won't be feeding the fire. (This cannot be done when a child is being aggressive or destructive.) Instead, by responding positively to only desired behavior, parents reinforce what they want vs. what they don't want. Plus, by allowing kids to practice “slowing their engines down” on their own, without parental prompts, they're learning how to handle frustration.

Learn to let go and when to laugh it off: Along with ignoring comes learning to loosen up. “If the snack ends up on the floor,” Long says, “instead of getting mad at the kids, I’ll say, ‘Oh no, you made a mess, let’s clean it up together.’ Do what you have to do to make it easier on yourself.”

Seek support: Long adds that it also helps to have a safety net of friends and relatives for those extremely bad days when you don’t feel you can calm yourself down and need to call in reinforcements. Blogs, [support groups](#), other parents and clinicians can all help by assuring parents they aren’t alone.

Own up to your feelings: Depending on the age and developmental level of the child, parents may, after things have calmed down, model for their kids how to talk about feelings. “You can tell them you’re not feeling respected or you’re feeling ignored,” Dr. Dickstein says. Dan Janzen, who has had “a hotheaded moment or two” with his son, 9, and daughter, 6, says he tries to give them “a way to understand the yelling—it’s not because they’re bad kids; it’s because I lost my temper. ‘I’m sorry I lost my temper — that was kind of rough, and I [shouldn’t yell at you](#). But do you understand why I got little frustrated?’ And then we have a brief conversation about the situation.”

“I also make a point of always following up quickly with something along the lines of, ‘Even when I lose my temper, I still love you,’” Janzen adds. “I think the running theme is to try to keep the eruptions from undermining their trust or security. No matter what happens, I’m still the same slightly ridiculous but well-intentioned daddy who loves them.”