



# Tantrums

## Children's Developmental and Behavioural Supports



Does your child engage in episodes of screaming and/or crying when they don't get their way? Do you find that it is hard to help them calm down? Tantrums are very common and even developmentally appropriate among toddler and preschool aged children. As your child matures and they learn to better regulate their emotions, the frequency, duration and intensity of their tantrum behaviour will often decrease. Some children require a bit more guidance and support to have fewer tantrums. If you are struggling with knowing what to do when your child engages in this behaviour, rest assured, there are some simple strategies you can use to decrease your child's tantrums.

### What does a tantrum look and sound like?

Tantrums are a part of the developmental stage that children can go through. Tantrums can start as early as 12 months of age and tend to subside around three to four years of age with increased language development. Your family doctor or paediatrician will complete developmental screenings to monitor your child to see how they are meeting their developmental milestones. If your child continues to have frequent, intense tantrums, follow up with your doctor to rule out possible medical, developmental or psychological reasons as to why tantrums might not be decreasing (Miller, 2023, Stanford Medicine, 2024).



#### What a tantrum looks like:

- Flopping to the floor
- Physical aggression (e.g., hitting, kicking, biting, hair pulling, punching, scratching)
- Bouncing up and down
- Throwing items
- Destruction of items/property

#### What a tantrum sounds like:

- Crying, whining, screaming
- Yelling, verbal refusal (e.g., "No!")
- Negative language (e.g., "I hate you!")
- Negative self-statements (e.g., "I'm dumb!")
- Inappropriate language (swearing)

## Where do I begin?

To understand why tantrum behaviour happens, you will have to do a little detective work. Following a few simple steps will help you to better understand your child's behaviour.



1. Observe the behaviour and the circumstances that surround it. What happens just before (the cause) and just after the behaviour (how it helped get your child to their goal; Miller, 2023).
2. Write down the information that you observe about the behaviour.
3. Look for patterns. Are there certain people that tantrums happen most often with? Are there certain situations, environments, or times of day that tantrums tend to happen (Miller, 2023)?

## Why do problem behaviours happen?

Behaviors occur for four different reasons (functions) to either get or avoid something (ErinOakKids, 2020).

1. **Sensory/Physical:** Behaviour happens to fulfill an internal need. For example, your child flaps their hands because it results in visual stimulation (which is pleasurable to them).
2. **Escape/Avoidance:** Behaviour happens to escape people places, or tasks. For example, when asked to get dressed, your child drops to the ground and yells. Their behaviour results in them avoiding or delaying the task.
3. **Attention:** Behaviour happens to get a response/attention from parents, siblings, caregivers, and/or peers. For example, your child screams because it results in the parent giving him/her attention (it could be positive or negative attention).
4. **Tangible/Activity:** Behaviour happens to gain access to items/activities in the environment. For example, when your child is told it's time to leave the park they scream and refuse. Their behaviour results in them getting to stay and play at the park longer.



# Preventing problem behaviours

When you have a better understanding of when and why your child has tantrums you can plan to prevent them from occurring or lessen the severity when they do occur. Below are some good general tips to prevent tantrums.



- **Spend time with your child:** Plan to spend at least five to 15 minutes with your child doing a preferred activity every day. Minimize instructions during this time. Let your child lead the play (Alamos et al., 2018).
- **Set limits:** Explain what the behaviour expectations are before activities begin and what the consequences will be depending on the outcome. Be sure to follow through with the stated consequence (e.g., “In five more minutes it’s time to go. If you come when I call you, you can watch a TV show. If you don’t, there will be no TV show.”; Child Mind Institute, 2023).
- **Offer choices:** This allows you to give your child a sense of control over their environment while making sure that they stay within the limits you set. For example, “Do you want to leave the park in 10 minutes or 12 minutes?” or “Do you want to wear the blue shirt or the purple shirt?” (Mayo Clinic Staff, 2022).

## Preventing tantrums in specific situations

Young children are more prone to tantrums when they are struggling to get or communicate basic needs. Below are some common situations children may be more prone to tantrums and some ideas to prevent tantrums when in these situations (Mayo Clinic Staff, 2022).

- **Your child is tired.**
  - Offer a space to rest.
  - Avoid scheduling activities close to nap/rest times or when you know they had a poor sleep the night before.
  - Adjust expectations (e.g., your child only has to tidy up a few items versus everything). If they need to do something, make the task easier or offer to help with the task.
- **Bedtime routine is difficult.**
  - Keep routine consistent from beginning to end (i.e., time routine starts and ends).
  - Establish preferred activity your child can get when the routine is complete (e.g., favourite books, song etc.).
- **Your attention is elsewhere** (e.g., important phone call, cooking).
  - Prepare a bin with activities your child can do on their own.
  - Let your child know the expectation (e.g., “First do activities quietly for 10 minutes and then we can do an activity together.”) and ensure you follow through with what you say.



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- **Meal times are difficult or your child is hungry.**
  - Minimize waiting (e.g., offer small snacks before the meal or don't call your child to table until the food is ready).
  - Offer choices (e.g., "Do you want three carrots or four?").
  - Keep meal times consistent. and involve them in the preparation (e.g., setting the table).
- **Transitions.**
  - Give your child warnings that change is coming and when they can next access the item they are having fun with.
  - Set up a visual schedule for the task.
  - Use a first/then board to motivate and show what your child can earn for a successful transition.
  - The resource section at the end has a link to ConnectABILITY. Their visuals engine has steps to make a first-then board and other visuals.

## Skill building

Young children are still learning to regulate their emotions and behaviours. We can help them along in the following ways:

- **Teach and practice relaxation techniques.**
  - When your child is calm, teach them new skills to learn to relax. Ideas such as smell the flower and blow out the candle (deep breathing) or tracing a square with your finger (breathing in and out at each corner) can be effective. Consider using a visual of these actions to make them more concrete.
- **Teach and practice the appropriate behaviour** (Stein, 2022).
  - Identify why your child tantrums, and practise teaching them what they should do instead (e.g., if they tantrum instead of using words, when calm, practise having them ask for items and reinforcing them with praise).
- **Model Strategies.**
  - Use the relaxation strategies in front of your child, and describe what you are doing (e.g., "Mommy is going to smell the flower/blow out the candle to stay calm.").

## How to respond to tantrum behaviour

Try to stay calm (e.g., take a couple of deep breaths) and acknowledge your child's feelings (e.g., say: "It looks like you are sad/angry. Can I help?").

If your child is showing a **low-level behaviour** (whining):

- Model a more appropriate way for your child to request what they want (e.g., "When you need help you can say: help please."; Dana and Yogeetha, 2021).
- Have your child repeat the verbal statement/request (e.g., "You try. Say: help please."), and then help them complete the task since they asked appropriately.



If your child is showing a **high-level behaviour** (Child Mind Institute, 2023):

- Do not comment on the behaviours during the tantrum (e.g. throwing toys, hitting)
- Ensure you and your child are safe.
- Minimize the amount of attention given during the tantrum.
- Tell your child “When you are calm, we can talk.”
- Model a calming strategy that you taught your child when they were in a calm state.
- Ensure all caregivers are consistent in responding to your child’s tantrum behaviour.
- Once your child is calm, explain the expectations for appropriate behaviour (e.g. “When you want something you need to use words that I can understand.”).
- Return to the reason why the tantrum began. If you asked your child to complete a task, make sure they are still expected to complete the task before moving forward.

## Some things to consider:

- If attention is the reason for your child’s tantrum behaviour, when you begin to decrease the amount of attention they get, the tantrum may get worse before it gets better. If this happens, it is a good indication that you are on the right track.
- Behaviour that once worked for your child to get them what they want, no longer works and therefore they try harder to make it work again.
- As long as all caregivers are responding to the behaviour in the same way, the escalation should be temporary. If a behaviour no longer works to get your child what they want, there is no reason for them to keep doing it.
- Remember that your child is not engaging in behaviours to frustrate you. They are engaging in these behaviours because they work.
- Be patient and be consistent



## References

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## Additional resources

ConnectABILITY.ca <https://connectability.ca/category/kids/>; Sick Kids <https://sickkidscmh.ca/children-families/>

## Information

If you need more information, visit [www.durham.ca/cdbs](http://www.durham.ca/cdbs)

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