



Center for Early Education and Development

# Questions About Kids

## How Can I Survive These Temper Tantrums?

It happens in the supermarket, at the clinic, in church, and at the in-laws' holiday dinner: Your normally happy child, with seemingly little provocation, has a temper tantrum--crying, screaming, kicking, or throwing himself on the floor.

### What Causes Tantrums?

It's important to remember that temper tantrums are common and expected behavior for young children. Some causes are very logical, although not obvious when a child is kicking and screaming. Your child may be hungry, sick, overly tired, or overstimulated by too much activity. Her routine may have been disturbed. Whatever the immediate situation, one of the major causes of temper tantrums is frustration. Perhaps her independence is being thwarted, or she's heard too many "don'ts" in too short a time. For some children, even pleasantly exciting situations can lead to a tension build-up which triggers tantrums as easily as unpleasant situations.

**Limited understanding and limited verbal ability + frustration = tantrums.**

Young children are very capable of feeling anger, but they are unable intellectually to understand what is really happening. Combine this limited understanding with the limited verbal ability of a young child, add a dose of frustration, and voila!--your child's behavior is out of control.

### What Can a Parent Do?

When young children lose control, they need an adult to help them regain control of their behavior.

Parents should first work toward preventing the child from hurting himself and others. Remember that each child is different; what works for one child may have no effect on another. Here, as in all aspects of child rearing, there is no magic formula. There are, however some guidelines.

**Don't give in.. Try to remain calm... Don't try to reason with your child until she has calmed down.**

- Although it may be easier, do not give in to temper tantrums! If you do, your child will learn to associate this behavior with getting her own way. Once a parent stops reinforcing the tantrum behavior (by giving in), there will be no gain on the child's part.
- Temper tantrums have been described as emotional blackmail done in the presence of an audience for the purpose of gaining a desired goal. When possible, try to ignore the tantrum. Pick up the child calmly, tell him quietly that you do not approve of his behavior, and put him in his room, telling him he will stay there until he feels better. With no audience, he has less incentive to cry, kick, and scream.
- If you can't remove yourself physically from the situation or think it wouldn't be safe or appropriate to do so, tell your child "I will stay right here with you until you feel better." Then attempt to remove yourself psychologically by not reacting to her behavior.
- Try to remain calm. Although this is easier said than done, shaking, spanking, or screaming at your child only brings parents down to the child's level.



- Don't try to reason with a child having a tantrum. It's not effective, and will only frustrate you. Wait until your child calms down before talking to her.
- After the tantrum has subsided, offer comfort. Tantrums can be traumatic experiences for young children and they need reassurance from caring adults.

**In public, focus on your child's needs, not strangers' opinions.**

- When your child has a tantrum in a public place, focus on the needs of your child. Don't let your embarrassment make you more concerned about the opinions of strangers than about the needs of your child. Most people have probably gone through the same experience, and they know that a child's tantrum does not mean that you are a bad parent.

## Can Tantrums Be Prevented?

No. Children must pass through this stage in order to learn how to handle their emotions in the future. However, an alert parent can sometimes anticipate a tantrum and head it off. If you know dinner will be late, offer your child a snack to tide her over. If your child has had a very stimulating afternoon, a bath before supper may relax her. If she has difficulty changing activities, give her a warning and mention the appealing aspect of what is ahead. For example, "Let's pick out a book to read" is more appealing than "Let's get ready for bed now." If your child has tested your patience most of the morning, try to limit your negative responses to those which matter the most.

Coping with temper tantrums may be the most challenging aspect of parenting at this stage of a child's development. Remember, though, that it is a tough time for your child as well. By trying to understand this behavior and not overreacting, you can help your child through this unsettling phase with as little trauma as possible.

*By Karen M. Carlson, M.Ed., Minneapolis, Minnesota.*

## Questions About Kids is on the Web at:

<http://cehd.umn.edu/ceed>

**University of Minnesota  
Center for Early Education and Development  
1954 Buford Avenue, Suite 425  
St. Paul, Minnesota, 55108**

*Copyright © 2009 by Center for Early Education and Development*

*These materials may be freely reproduced for education/training or related activities. There is no requirement to obtain special permission for such uses. We do, however, ask that the following citation appear on all reproductions:*

*Reprinted with permission of the Center for Early Education and Development (CEED), College of Education and Human Development, University of Minnesota, 1954 Buford Avenue, Suite 425, St. Paul, Minnesota, 55108; phone: 612-625-3058; fax: 612-625-2093; e-mail: [ceed@umn.edu](mailto:ceed@umn.edu); web site: <http://cehd.umn.edu/ceed>.*

**COLLEGE OF EDUCATION  
+ HUMAN DEVELOPMENT**

**UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA**

*The "Question About Kids" series is published by the Center for Early Education and Development to provide state-of-the-art information about young children and families. They are reviewed by a panel of child development experts at the University of Minnesota. For further information, contact the Center at 612-625-3058.*