

Tantrums in Children with Disability and Developmental Delays

Tantrums are a normal experience of childhood. Over half of children under 5 years will experience one or more tantrums per week. Tantrums are equally common in boys and girls and can sometimes be more common in children with disability or developmental delays.



Tantrums (sometimes referred to as 'meltdowns' when severe) can become upsetting for parents because they can be embarrassing, challenging, and difficult to manage, especially in public.

Why do tantrums occur?

Children have tantrums because they are letting us know that something is upsetting them and they need help to manage their feelings.

As children get older they usually become more able to let other people know how they are feeling and they get better at managing their own emotions.

Children with disabilities or developmental delays may find it more difficult to organise and manage their emotions and so may require more time and more assistance from parents and carers to manage their feelings.

Children with disabilities or developmental delays may function in a different way from their peers in a range of areas and may experience difficulties with communication. This can lead to them experiencing greater levels of frustration and may result in an increase in tantrums.

The ability to cope with difficult feelings is very important for children's mental health, their learning at school and their ability to make friends. Children with developmental delays or disabilities often need extra help and patience to help them cope with the difficult feelings that lead to tantrums.

When can tantrums occur?

Because every child is different there are many different things that might trigger a tantrum, however, some of the common things include:

- being asked to do something or stop doing something
- bedtime
- meal times
- getting out of bed
- getting dressed
- visitors at the house or visiting another house
- car rides
- family activities involving siblings
- interactions with other children
- playtime.

Being aware of your child's tantrum triggers will help you to get in early and prevent the tantrum from getting out of control.

As well as the things mentioned above, other factors such as tiredness, feeling unwell and feeling pressured can also contribute to tantrums.

How can I respond when my child is experiencing a tantrum?

An important thing to remember when handling tantrums is to stay calm and help your child to feel that you are able to help them with their difficult feelings.

The following strategies may help:

Managing your own feelings is the first step in dealing with the tantrum

Take a moment to breathe deeply and gain control of your own emotions. If you are finding this too hard, ask another suitable adult to help you deal with the situation if possible.

Try to intervene before your child is out of control

When you notice the warning signs of a tantrum, suggest another activity that your child enjoys to distract them. A quick change of activity can often deal with the problem before it gets out of control. Getting involved early can really help!

Stay calm and don't argue with your child

Shouting and getting angry at your child usually only makes them more upset and the tantrum worse. Staying calm lets your child know that you can manage the situation and cope with their strong emotions.

Recognise your child's feelings

Get down to your child's eye level and let them know you have noticed how they are feeling. Use a calm voice and tell your child how they are feeling. Remember to use words your child will understand.

- Saying, "Jamie, you have your angry face on. Are you angry?" may work for younger children.
- For older children you might say something like: "It looks like you're angry at me because I asked you to stop playing the computer".

Stay with your child and remain calm if they are having difficulty in calming themselves

Not having control over their feelings can be really scary for children. They need to know that you are there to help them manage their feelings. If it is safe to do so, stay close to your child and let them know that you are connected with them by touching their arm or shoulder, but only if this is calming for your child.

Reassure your child with a gentle voice until they start to calm down. If you can, it may help to take them to a quiet place.

It is also very important to make sure that you are not in danger of being hurt by your child if they are lashing out. If they are lashing out you may need to move away but monitor them to make sure they are not hurting themselves.

Help your child to identify the triggers which led to their tantrum, and work out a better alternative

When your child has calmed down, it is useful to help them identify what triggered their tantrum, for example: "You got angry because Johnny took the car you were playing with". You might also ask your child, "What can you do next time this happens?" or tell them what to do next time. This helps your child learn how to handle these situations, reduces the chances of more tantrums occurring and may mean that future tantrums are less severe.

If your child is able to avoid a tantrum in a situation that would usually result in a tantrum, acknowledge them for dealing well with the situation. You might say, "Well done, Jamie! You listened well and stayed calm when I asked you to come inside".

Prevention and early intervention

It is often much easier to prevent temper tantrums than it is to manage them once they have erupted. Some prevention strategies include:

- Catch your child being good (rather than doing the wrong thing) and praise their positive behaviours, for example: "Good sharing, Alex!"
- Offer your child control over little things by giving them choices (but not too many at once).
- Keep things they are not allowed to have (such as your mobile phone) out of sight if this is practical.
- If your child is tired, hungry, unwell or already worked-up, avoid situations that are triggers for tantrums.
- Establish personal and family routines.
- Let your child know the end of an activity is approaching so that they are prepared for the transition. You might say, "Dinner's almost ready Kim, so you'll need to finish watching TV at the next ad break". Children with developmental delays or disabilities often need more time to take in and process this type of information.
- Prepare your child well before visiting new places or unfamiliar people, tell them what to expect, show them photos and so on.
- Provide learning, play, and social activities that are at your child's developmental level, so that they don't become frustrated or bored.
- Teach your child to relax by using deep breathing, stretching, soothing music or visual imagery (imagining pleasant places or activities), to help them feel calm and safe. Most children will benefit from learning to do this with you and doing this regularly will make these things more effective.
- Teach your child to express their anger/frustration constructively. You may wish to encourage them to state how they are feeling and choose a positive way of dealing with this feeling such as by taking a break before returning to a task. You may need to show and explain to them how you calm yourself down. Explain what works for you when you feel upset or frustrated.
- Help your child develop a 'feelings vocabulary' by naming their feelings. Using visual tools (for example, facial expressions paired with labels of emotions) may help.

Where can I get help?

Dealing with your child's tantrums is not easy. Remember that you are not alone.

- Acknowledge how you feel. It is normal for parents to feel stressed, sad, confused, guilty, or worried at times.
- Talk to supportive people. This may be a spouse, family member, friend, doctor or a health or disability worker. Share your feelings with them. This will help keep you in a healthy frame of mind and will help you deal with the looks you may get from people who do not understand your child's disability or developmental delay, or your response to their tantrum.
- Ask an allied health professional for advice about how to respond to tantrums. An experienced professional such as a psychologist, social worker, counsellor or occupational therapist may be able to suggest new ways for dealing with the tantrum behaviour if you are experiencing difficulties.

Contacts and resources

Refer to our information "Intellectual Disability and Behaviour: understanding and responding to your child's difficult behaviour" - www.sa.gov.au/topics/community-support/disability/resources/information-a-to-z

Your GP or allied health professional can give you additional support and advice.

You can also obtain advice over the phone by calling the services below or by contacting your local Disability Services office:

- Parent Help Line: 1300 364 100
- Lifeline: 13 11 14
- Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS):
Northern suburbs: 8252 0133 - Eastern suburbs: 8207 8999
Southern suburbs: 8298 7744 - Western suburbs: 8341 1222
CAMHS also provide services in non-metropolitan regions
- Department for Communities and Social Inclusion: www.dcsi.sa.gov.au
- Child and Youth Health: www.cyh.com.au
- Parent Easy Guides: http://www.parenting.sa.gov.au/peglist_general.htm

References

Chicken soup for the soul: Children with special needs: Stories of love and understanding for those who care for children with disabilities. Canfield, J., Hansen, M.V., McNamara, H. & Simmons, K. (2007). Deerfield Beach: Health Communications Inc.

How to talk so kids will listen and listen so kids will talk. Faber, A. & Mazlish, E. (1999). New York: Avon Books.

Love you to pieces: Creative writers on raising a child with special needs Martin, A. (2008). Boston: Beacon Press.

Raising an emotionally intelligent child: The heart of parenting. Gottman, J., Declaire, J. & Goleman, D. (1998). New York: Fireside.

