

A parent's guide to... tantrums

By Penny Tassoni, early years consultant and author

Few parents escape the embarrassment of their child having a tantrum at the supermarket checkout or on the floor of a restaurant. It's one of those no-win situations when the tut-tutting public focus on you and your child. So, what is it that turns your cute toddler or three-year-old into a raging spitfire who can't be reasoned or even pleaded with? The answer, to a great extent, is linked to your child's developmental stage, with a few add-on factors such as tiredness and hunger.

Let's begin by looking at development. The chances are that if your child is having

serious tantrums, they will be somewhere between the ages of 18 months and just over three years. (Don't panic if your child is older – we'll look at tantrums in older children next month.)

AGES AND STAGES

Of course, there are always some children who start early, but by and large, the serious tantrums, where distraction just doesn't work any more, usually begin at the point when your child has become very confident with the world. And it's a frustrating place.

Your child can now see and often reach interesting things. They no longer believe

PREVENTING TANTRUMS

There is no fail-safe way to avoid tantrums, but these strategies can make a difference:

- Try hard to give your child opportunities to do things for themselves – for example, put toothpaste on a brush, hold a shopping list.
- Involve your child as much as you can when shopping or going out.
- Give your child some safe 'real' objects rather than toys to play with, such as shoes, cardboard box, vegetables.
- Spend time doing things that you both enjoy – sharing books, playing together.
- Work out if there is a pattern to tantrums – are they in the afternoons? – and consider putting your child down for a nap or earlier to bed at night.
- Give your child some warning about what is happening next, and avoid rushing.
- Do not give things to your child that will have to be taken back.
- Be consistent about what your child can and cannot do.



that when an object is put up high or out of reach that it has just magically 'disappeared'. Nor will they be fobbed off with a toy, a peace offering or a bribe. No, your child's brain is now so developed that they can keep focusing their energies and attention for longer periods.

CONCEPT MISMATCH

Your child is also likely to be more aware of what is happening and will be keen to copy you and the way that you use objects. Take that mobile phone, for example. Your child wants to use it, just like you do. Immediately! And, that's the other snag. While your child's physical skills and brain have developed, concepts such as 'later', safety or possession have not quite emerged.

This means that your child simply won't have it that the toy in the hands of another child does not belong to them, or that it is not a good idea for them to play with the cupboard door.

Your child might hear what you are saying, but doesn't yet have the language skills to fully understand your meaning or negotiate with you. It's all too much for them. So

out come the tears and the anger. Neither of which were planned in advance. They are just responses to pent-up frustration, which may well be fuelled by hunger or tiredness. The latter particularly affects

ONE PARENT'S EXPERIENCE

Ayse's tantrums began when she was 20 months old. At first they were half-hearted and I just laughed, but within a couple of months, they were full blown. She would kick out, throw things and scream. At one time, it felt that we were just going from one tantrum to the next and that I was treading on eggshells. Anything would set her off. It was exhausting and I often felt like giving up and letting her do anything that she wanted. I tried cuddling her, getting cross with her and even putting her in her room, but none of those worked.

At the two-year check-up, my health visitor asked me

about how much sleep she was getting, and also to think about life from her perspective. She also suggested that I picked up a magazine the next time she had a tantrum so that I could stay calm rather than react to her. Within a week, things got better. I removed things such as the remote control out of sight, played with her more often and also let her nap for longer.

Life is much easier now. The tantrums still happen, but pass more quickly because I no longer react to them. In the last month, I can also see a big difference now that she can talk more. I can see light at the end of the tunnel.

your child's ability to control their emotions. So what are your options in these moments?

WAYS TO RESPOND

I always recommend trying a little distraction. You lose nothing and who knows, it may just work, providing that you can attract their attention before they become too focused on what they want to touch or do.

Then it's a case of damage limitation. Acknowledge that your child is not happy and that it's hard for them. This at least helps children know that we are on their side, even if we can't let them have what they want.

What you do next probably depends on where you are and the temperament of your child. If you are lucky, you may be able to comfort your child, but if this does not work, you may need either to pick them up and put

them in a safe place or away from prying eyes, or to sit back and let the torrent rage.

The key is to keep your voice gentle and stay resolutely calm. Remember that your child did not plan to have a tantrum in advance, it just happened. Becoming angry, threatening or shouting is likely to escalate the situation – and also teach your child how to wind you up and gain your attention.

How long the tantrum lasts will often depend on your reaction, their temperament and how you have dealt with them – like giving in – in the past.

Once your child has calmed down, tell them how pleased you are to 'have them back' and give them a hug. Then leave it at that. Try to find something nice you can both do, so peace can reign.

Next month: tantrums in older children