



# Tantrums

## You and Your Foster Child

As many parents know, temper tantrums are often an unpleasant part of a child's early years. Children might get angry, cry, scream, hit things, deliberately fall to the floor, or hold their breath. The behavior can be alarming.

However unpleasant these tantrums are, it is important to understand that they are a common part of growing up. Most children between the ages of 1 and 4 years throw a tantrum from time to time.

Don't be fooled by the popular notion that this behavior is limited to a specific age—the so-called “terrible twos.” Certainly, many 2-year-olds have tantrums. But children as young as 12 months can have tantrums, and they may still be prone to having them up to their fourth birthday. The “terrible twos” also implies that the behavior is bad or wrong. It may be alarming, frustrating, and even embarrassing to parents. But, in most cases, the fact that a child throws a tantrum is not a sign of a developmental problem.

Many things can cause a tantrum. Foster children who have experienced abuse and/or neglect may be particularly prone to having problems associated with tantrums, such as developmental delays, separation anxiety, and a disrupted, unstable home life.

### Tips to help you deal with tantrums

Knowing a little about tantrums and what to do about them will help you through this sometimes challenging stage.

### What causes tantrums

Several things can trigger tantrums. Here are some examples:

- Disrupted sleep.
- Delayed motor development.
- Separation anxiety, which children can begin to experience between 12 and 14 months.
- Missing a meal, or being tired, overstimulated, or bored.
- Health problems, such as a chronic illness, hyperactivity, hearing and/or speech problems, and allergies.
- Frustration in not getting something they want.
- Frustration stemming from not being able to communicate well.
- Difficulty managing emotions.
- Being caught in the middle of a struggle between divorced or separated parents, or a struggle between birth parents and foster parents.

## A child may react to “no” by having a tantrum

Young children need to have limits. But they don’t always like them, especially when they hear the word “no.”

- When you set firm limits, your child may throw a tantrum to try to influence your decision.

## Preventing or limiting tantrums

Here are a few suggestions that might help limit the number of tantrums your child has:

- Make sure your child does not skip meals.
- Say “no” only when necessary.
- Occasionally say “yes.” Whenever possible and reasonable, let your toddler win.
- Be clear and firm about decisions.
- Don’t give repeated warnings. Warn once and follow through immediately the next time.
- Try to keep frustrations to a minimum.
- If you see a tantrum coming, try to divert it with a hug, song, silly dance, favorite toy, or an activity that shifts your child’s attention to something pleasant.
- Praise and reinforce positive behavior when it happens.

## Handling tantrums

Despite your best efforts, tantrums can happen. Here are suggestions about how to handle them when they occur.

- Stay calm and composed.
- Give your child time to calm down.
- Don’t raise your voice.
- Don’t punish your child for a tantrum.
- Don’t try to use logic during a tantrum.
- Make sure that your child is safe during a tantrum. Keep sharp objects, other children, and breakable things out of reach.
- Try to shift your child’s attention to something else—a toy or game, for example.
- Make sure your child is in a safe place. Simply stand nearby and watch without reacting, interfering, or talking until your child stops and begins to calm down.
- Do not give in to demands made during the tantrum. Giving in sends the message that throwing a tantrum is a good way to get what they want.

- After the tantrum is over, let your child know that you understand his or her frustration. Say that you, too, get upset when you cannot get what you want.

## When tantrums happen in public

Public tantrums are different than others because there may be an audience. Try to plan ahead how to handle a tantrum in public. Here are a few tips:

- When a tantrum occurs in public, quickly take your child to a more private place, such as the car or a bathroom.
- You may need to hold your child to prevent injury or damage to property.

## What to do after a tantrum

- Give your child plenty of time to become totally calm before taking other steps.
- Don’t go over the incident with your child or try to figure out why it happened.
- Move on. If the tantrum was brief, let your child know that you are proud that he or she was able to calm down so fast.
- If the cause of the tantrum was something avoidable, such as a missed meal or tiredness, try to avoid those situations in the future.
- Turn to something that your child enjoys doing.
- Praise your child for the good behavior that follows a tantrum.
- Cuddle and comfort your child. Let him or her know that your love has no limits.

## When to seek professional help

Although tantrums are a natural part of development, there are certain circumstances that can signal the need to seek professional help. These include:

- Tantrums that occur twice or more often each day.
- Tantrums that frequently occur with strong feelings, such as extreme anger, sadness, helplessness, or with behavioral problems such as sleep disorders or refusing food.
- Tantrums that lead you or another caregiver to violent behavior.

