

YOUR TODDLER

Tots and tantrums -Nov2005

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Are you afraid to set foot in a supermarket with your child? Follow our guidelines for coping with tantrums.

Few mothers don't have a horror of their two-year-old rolling on the floor and screaming blue murder in the middle of a shopping centre on a busy Saturday morning. (Particularly when passers by glare at the mother, nod their heads sagely and say, "poor child.") Those minutes can seem like hours as your toddler shows no sign of stopping the racket and you feel increasingly helpless.

WHEN THEY START

In spite of being called the "terrible twos," tantrums can start before two years and continue a lot longer. (Or haven't you seen an adult *throw his/her toys out of the cot,*" when things don't work the way he/she wanted!) Tantrums are a normal part of a child's development and just as different children have different natures, so the degree and frequency of tantrums will differ from child to child.

As soon as we give into them i.e. hand over the chocolate bar or buy the robot with rotating galactic weapon, the battle is won and we are a lost cause. From

then on every child knows that to get what they want, all it takes is a tantrum and bingo the problem is solved.

HOW TO DEAL WITH THEM

I don't mind how many times books tell you to see tantrums as "opportunities for education," the fact is education is usually the last thing on a stressed out parents mind as their offspring yells the shopping-centre down. Tantrums are commonly about opposition and frustration. The child wants what it can't have. It has chosen something and its choice is being thwarted. As adults, most of us have learnt to control our anger at having our choice squashed, such as when one partner dominates the TV remote, without sulking or throwing a tantrum. However, a toddler has not yet learnt to deal with desire and refusal. Sometimes the frustration at not being able to manipulate the world becomes too much to contain. The problem is exacerbated when the child is tired, hungry or unwell.

DEVELOPING WILL

Children at this age may also battle to make up their minds. They may think they want something only to change their minds when it arrives. This causes them and the parents' further frustration. As the child starts to leave its mother's side he or she learns that they are separate entities from the mother. The child also learns that he or she has a will that may differ from the mother. When the mother doesn't comply, for a child who has just learnt to communicate verbally, this can feel like discussing the finer points of Renaissance architecture with a cow. They just don't seem to get what it is you

want. The resulting frustration is huge to someone who is just developing a will of their own.

Tantrums may manifest as the desire to have willpower over someone else – to let their will win. If they lose they feel powerless. If they win then they only have to yell the place down again to win the war. Too much discipline and the child's will may get broken, independent action is reduced and self-esteem will suffer. Too little and the child believes they are omnipotent (i.e. a precocious brat). A balanced, calm approach and the child will develop individuality and healthy self-esteem.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU GIVE IN?

Giving in to your child is a recipe for further tantrums. It's the easiest of the options but potentially the most damaging. Offering minor choices is one way of avoiding a tantrum, as in: "do you want apple or litchi juice?" By empowering the child to make a choice you are fulfilling their need for independence. Don't take the child out when they are tired, unwell or hungry. In the throws of a tantrum, reflect back to the child what is disturbing him/her. Just knowing you understand can help to calm things down. Often a gentle hug helps. Try not to lose your temper, as the two of you screaming only exacerbates the problem. Spanking doesn't help either, as you simply teach the child that violence is an okay way to behave. By demonstrating calmness yourself, you set an example to the child of what behavior you expect. Children mimic their parents. A school going child can be sent to his/her room to cool off.

WHY DO SOME CHILDREN THROW TANTRUMS MORE THAN OTHERS/

Why do some children throw more tantrums than others do and continue to have tantrums past the toddler age? This can be due to having a stronger will, a more fiery nature, success with getting their way with past tantrums, watching their parents scream and shout and so learning this as an acceptable way to behave, repressed anger, low self-esteem, very authoritarian/dominating parents or undisciplined parents with few boundaries.

Tantrums are a normal part of development, but like anything in life when they are excessive, they indicate that something in the psyche of the child or its environment is out of balance.

FOUR STAGES OF TANTRUMS AND HOW TO HELP THEM

- 1) The first stage to a tantrum is **anger** when what a child wants to happen doesn't. This manifests in the familiar screaming and hitting/leg kicking.
- 2) This is often followed by **sadness** at not getting what they want and results in crying
- 3) Behind the crying is the **fear** that the opportunity is gone and that they will never get the chocolate bar. Someone else will buy it or take it away.
- 4) In the older child, there may be **guilt** at having said or behaved in a way they know is not good or pleasing to their parents.

Working through the tantrum with the child who may be overawed at the enormousness of their feelings, often involves working back through these four stages by acknowledging each stage. For instance, you may say:

- 1) I know you were **angry** darling because you wanted that toy.

- 2) It made you **sad** when you couldn't have it didn't it?
- 3) I guess you are **afraid** that the toy will be gone, and you won't ever be able to get it? They are quite a few of them and when its your birthday perhaps we can get one.
- 4) Let the child say sorry and you in turn can give them a reassuring hug and say that you forgive them. This lets go of the **guilt**.

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