COPING WITH TANTRUMS



Toddlers have feelings that are just as strong and complex as adults and a very small toolbox for managing them. When those feelings get too big, they spill out as a meltdown on the kitchen floor, a scream in the grocery store or a full body collapse. Tantrums are a normal, expected part of toddlerhood, and understanding why they happen is the first step toward helping your child move through them.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Behaviors, not words, are the way young children communicate that something is wrong, it is a flag that they need help problem solving.
- Hunger, tiredness, overstimulation, change and new independence are also some of the most common tantrum triggers.
- Staying calm is the most powerful tool you have in the moment. Your nervous system helps regulate theirs.
- Teaching emotional skills and validating feelings, while maintaining boundaries builds long-term resilience.
- Most tantrums are a normal part of toddler development. Support is available if the behaviors feel bigger than your family can manage alone.

COMMON TRIGGERS

Most tantrums don't come out of nowhere. They're usually connected to something specific going on in your toddler's body, environment or development. It can also be a series of small frustrations that compound and lead to behaviors that challenge us. Here are a few major tantrum triggers you might have seen:

1. Physical Discomfort and Overstimulation

Some of the most common (and overlooked) tantrum triggers are physical. A hungry, tired or overstimulated toddler has far less capacity to manage their emotions. If their emotional capacity is like a bucket, once the bucket fills up they'll have a lower capacity to deal with everyday disappointment and frustration. You might notice:

- Meltdowns that cluster around naptime or bedtime
- Behavior that gets worse the longer you're out running errands
- Bigger reactions in loud, bright or crowded places

2. Changes at Home or Childcare

Toddlers thrive on predictability. When something shifts, whether it's a new sibling, a move, a change in childcare or even a new daily routine, they often respond with a lower capacity to handle big feelings and more challenging behavior. This is their way of processing change, not usually a sign that something is wrong with your child or the way you are parenting them. If you identify a change around the time your child starts having more tantrums, this is really common. It's also a great opportunity to help them practice self-soothing and learn to calm down.

3. Developmental Leaps and New Independence

Toddlerhood is full of developmental leaps. Dropping a nap, gaining new language skills, learning to walk or run, becoming more aware of their own preferences, these shifts are exciting and disorienting at the same time. A toddler who is suddenly aware that they have opinions (and that those opinions are sometimes different from yours) will test that new independence, often loudly and relentlessly. Helping your child put words to what they are struggling with can help them make sense of their feelings.

4. Unmet Needs and Communication Gaps

Sometimes a tantrum is simply a toddler trying to tell you they need something and they don't have the words for it. This might be a sensory need, a request they can't articulate or a feeling they don't have a label for. Watching for patterns in when and where tantrums happen can offer helpful clues. Using developmental screening tools* regularly are especially helpful in tracking your child's patterns and needs.

*https://www.centerforearlychildhood.org/online-training/developmental-screenings

BEHAVIOR AS COMMUNICATION

What tantrums are telling you

One of the most helpful thoughts a parent can have when their child is upset is to start asking, "What is this behavior telling me?" instead of "How do I make this behavior stop?". We know that this is a tall order! Make a list of what resources are available to you when you need to take a break or get help. You deserve both.

HOW TO RESPOND

What you do in the moment matters less than how you show up while you do it. Toddlers borrow their sense of wellbeing from the adults around them, which means your emotional thermometer has a direct effect on how quickly your child is able to settle.

Stay Calm

Before you can help your toddler find calm, it helps to seek a little of your own first. Take a breath. Notice your own body. You don't have to be totally calm, just calm enough to be the adult in the room. Toddlers don't need a parent who is perfect or has all the answers: They need a parent who can stay present without getting on the emotional roller coaster with them. Try having a little contest with yourself: How matter-of-fact can I possibly sound saying what I need to say? If you find your voice coming out in a way that was more frustrated than you wanted it to, you can always model taking a "pause" and trying again. Try something like : "That came out different than I meant it…I'm going to try again" modeling this kind of self-talk helps kids learn that they can be accountable for their behavior and change course when they need to.

Talk About Feelings Without Giving In

It's possible to validate a feeling without "bribing" or caving in to the demand attached to the behavior. You might try:
"You're really mad that we have to leave the park. It's hard to stop playing when you're having fun."
This tells your toddler that their feeling is real and okay, while still holding the boundary ("and we still need to leave"). Over time, this combination of warmth and structure helps toddlers feel both understood and safe. Providing the structure can be challenging so it can help to give kids two choices that will both work for you. You could try something like: "Do you want me to hold your hand when we leave or ride in the stroller?"

TANTRUM FAQS

Should I Ignore Tantrums or Respond to Them?
Rather than ignoring or giving in, a really supportive approach is to stay present and validate the feeling while holding the boundary. Your toddler doesn't need you to fix the feeling or give them exactly what they are demanding. They need to know you're there while they move through their feelings.

What if I need more help?
At the Center for Early Childhood Connections, we work with babies, toddlers, kids and their families using a relationship-based, play-based approach, never behavior modification for its own sake.
If you find that you need support deciding how to respond to your child's big expressions of emotions or if they are having very frequent tantrums that are making family life challenging, the CECC is here to support you.
Feel free to reach out by phone at 510-438-1996 or email: hello@thececc.org