

How to Handle Tantrums

Miriam Koenig, M.S., M.F.T.

Tantrums are the bane of parents everywhere. They can seemingly come out of nowhere, and a lot of parents feel powerless once their child is having one. There are two kinds of tantrums and it's important to recognize which kind your child is having before you can effectively deal with the problem.

The first type of tantrum is the one that involves a loss of self-control on the child's part. In this scenario, the child has simply fallen apart: he is tired, hungry, over-stimulated, having trouble transitioning between activities, or something else has overwhelmed his coping mechanisms. You can recognize this type of tantrum because it's very difficult to get a child to hear you or to have a rational conversation with your child. I think "meltdown" is probably a better word for this type of behavior than tantrum because people tend to associate the word "tantrum" with something a child throws, as if they decided to pick up a baseball and throw it. Using the word meltdown helps you to understand that this is usually not a controlled act; in fact, it represents a loss of control. I believe that meltdowns are generally the more common type of tantrum, especially in very young children.

With tantrums, an ounce of prevention is truly worth a pound of cure. There are lots of ways that parents can reduce the frequency of tantrums. Let's examine that classic scenario familiar to parents everywhere: the child who has a tantrum in the market. Certain conditions are going to increase the chances of this occurring. If your child is hungry, tired or has already been dragged to five different stores, the likelihood that he will fall apart goes up significantly. The best way to avoid tantrums is to avoid the situation that leads to them. You have to know your child; what kind of situations lead to a meltdown? Does she have trouble if she misses a nap? Does he fall apart if he is hungry? Are new situations overwhelming? Are transitions a problem?

Another helpful strategy is to give children a feeling of control whenever possible. I am especially speaking to parents of toddlers and preschoolers. Many children this age do not handle transitions well. It can be helpful to let a child know that an activity, such as a diaper change, is coming and to make them an active participant in the transition, allowing them to get the diaper, etc. You can ask questions such as "Do you want milk or juice?" or "Would you rather take your bear or your blankie to bed?" Don't ask open questions

because this can lead to the very problem you are trying to avoid. If you ask a child, "What would you like to drink?" and she says, "Coke" and you say, "No." you may have a problem. Giving them choices works well, because whatever they choose is already acceptable to you and they have held onto a feeling of control that is important to a child in that age range.

Rituals are also very helpful. Many young children have great difficulty making transitions and transitions often precipitate tantrums. Leaving a friend's house, taking a bath, getting dressed and the hardest one - going to bed – are all transitions that trigger full-scale meltdowns in many children. First, it is helpful to forewarn the child so he can begin to adjust to the transition. "Soon we will be putting our coats on and getting in the car" or "When breakfast is over we will get dressed". Rituals can also make transitions much easier. Perhaps a little game of "This little Piggy" while you are dressing your child, or a story before bedtime would be helpful. These give your child something to look forward to during what may be a difficult, or even frightening, transition. Rituals are comforting and containing and can be very helpful. It is especially helpful for children who transition between two homes to have a familiar ritual at the beginning and end of each transition period.

Don't forget the power of distraction with young children. When my kids were young, I averted many meltdowns in the car by exclaiming, "Look at the trash truck!" (cement mixer, fire truck, etc.) Often very young children will rally if they're offered a good distraction.

The above methods should help to reduce the frequency of tantrums, but will not completely eliminate them. So, what should you do when your child finally has a major meltdown? When a child tantrums, he has used up all of his internal controls and is completely disintegrating. **Your child needs your help in order to regain those internal controls.** A young child may need to crawl into the rocking chair with you with a bottle and blankie until he is recovered. He may need to be put into his crib where he feels safe and contained. Some children can calm themselves down better if they're left alone while others need to be with a parent.

If you're in a public situation it's best to leave if possible or, if you can't, to try to find a private corner. Public situations compound the problem because *you* may be feeling embarrassed or inadequate as a parent. Try to rise above those feelings. If you're somewhere, like a store, tell yourself you don't

know these people and won't see them again and if you're somewhere where they know you, then feel free to say, "Johnny missed his nap today. Excuse me, while I deal with this." If you can't excuse yourself, you can talk calmly to your child and validate his feelings. "I know it's hard to see all that candy and not be able to have any. We're going to go home and put the groceries away and have lunch." After the tantrum is over you may want to go over what happened and help the child realize what helped him gain control.

With older children, it is useful to help them recognize when they are feeling out of control and to help them find what works best for them. Sometimes an older child just needs your presence for containment. If she's struggling over homework it may help her to stay in control if you sit next to her and give her encouragement. The same principles apply as with a young child, but you adjust to the age of the child.

An acronym that helps some kids is HALT. Teach your child to stop for a moment (halt) and ask himself, "Am I Hungry, Angry, Lonely or Tired?" You can ask your children these questions at first, with the goal being that they figure out what it is they need and what they can do to keep themselves from having a meltdown.

The second type is the tantrum in which the intent is to manipulate the parent. This has more of a staged quality to it and can usually be interrupted. Some kids do throw tantrums to manipulate their parents. This is the type of behavior that people often associate with the word tantrum. In this scenario, children figure out that if they scream and cry loud enough, their parents will give in. Most kids will try this once. Some will try it many times. And some will keep doing it because *they find that it works*. Children are smart. When they find something that works, they keep on doing it.

When a child throws a tantrum to manipulate you, that is behavior you want to extinguish immediately. If you reinforce this behavior by giving in, you are setting a dangerous precedent. Some parents will capitulate to a tantrum because it is the easiest thing to do in the moment. But in the long run, you are going to have a problem. When a child throws this kind of tantrum, this is the time to calmly say, "I know you want this but I already explained that the answer is no and you need to know that I am not going to change my mind." Then leave the room so he doesn't have an audience.

How can you tell the difference between the two types? A tantrum thrown to manipulate doesn't usually involve the complete loss of control that the first kind of tantrum does (although it can lead to a loss of control if it continues long enough). Usually there is a more staged effect to the manipulative tantrum. In contrast, a child who is having a meltdown will have it regardless of whether there is an audience and will continue to sob if you walk away. He is usually so tired and out of control that he no longer knows what he wanted in the first place and no longer care about the initial trigger. The child who is deliberately manipulating needs an audience and will stop without one. The child who is manipulating can stop if he or she wants to whereas the child who has lost internal controls has a much harder time regaining control.

If you would like to request a consultation, please contact me at Miriam@miriamkoenig.com or at 818-783-4032.

