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I'll Kick and Scream Until I Get My Way: Temper Tantrums

FOR PROVIDERS

Angelique threw a huge tantrum when I took away the paper she was holding. She had picked up Andrea's by mistake and was convinced it was her own. When I gave her the right one, she started screaming. She ripped up the paper, threw it on the floor, and stomped on it. I gave her paper to make another one at home but she kept on screaming.

What Is It?

Children as young as two years old may have temper tantrums when they do not get what they want or when they become extremely frustrated. They may also have temper tantrums when someone asks them to do something they don't want to do. This emotional outburst is easily recognized when a child kicks, cries or screams, throws things, bangs about, or throws herself to the floor. An older child may replace the physical demonstration of emotion with loud, angry verbal protests.

Tantrums reach different levels of intensity depending upon whether or not children receive attention, believe they will get what they want, and learn more effective coping skills. Young children may not have the language needed to express how they feel and can become anxious about these overwhelming feelings. Children of all ages

can get locked into a tantrum and not know how to stop the rush of emotions. You can help children learn to express themselves in more satisfactory ways as well as support them when they do lose control.

Observe and Problem Solve

To better understand how to help a child who has tantrums, observe what leads up to the outburst. Watch the child in a variety of situations. Use the suggestions that follow as you decide on the most appropriate course of action.

➤ *Does this child tantrum because she is frustrated by a task?*

Some children become frustrated when they try to do a task they are not yet skilled enough to perform. Provide many activities with varying skill levels from which children may choose. Steer children to choices that best match their abilities. Teach them to avoid, for the time being, those that are too hard. Say, "Let's look for a puzzle with about six pieces." Intervene as this child is becoming frustrated. Help her learn to recognize her own tolerance level. Say, "It looks like you're getting frustrated. Take a break, count to ten, or take a few big breaths." Encourage this child to ask for help. Point out how you need help cleaning the room and someone else needs help tying their shoe. Teach her safe ways to express herself when she is angry. She can stamp her feet, yell, crumple paper, tell someone, or pound play-dough. When this child is being patient, comment on it.

➤ *Does this child see others tantrum and imitate their behavior?*

Many young children imitate the behavior of those around them. Pay attention to this child many times a day when she is behaving appropriately. When she watches someone else who is having a tantrum, let her know the other child is having a hard time. Get her interested in some other activity. Praise her for having ideas of her own.

Be careful not to model emotional outbursts yourself. Recognize your own need to take a break. Use words to name your feelings. Demonstrate how to calm down by listening to music, looking at a book, singing, drawing, or playing. Avoid demanding that things are done *now*. This child may think she has the right to demand what she wants *now* too.

➤ *Does this child tantrum more frequently when she is tired, sick, or hungry?*

Most people find it difficult to cope when they are tired, sick, or hungry. Children are even more prone to outbursts under these circumstances. Meeting this child's basic needs will help to reduce the risk of tantrums. Vary your schedule to accommodate this child and others who may be over tired or hungry. Avoid new or challenging activities during times of the day this child is fatigued. Late afternoon and just before nap or lunch are particularly taxing times for children. Understand that emotions are close to the surface the day before a child is ill. If possible, anticipate other situations that may cause this child to tantrum. Common triggers include: playing with other children when this child needs alone time, being asked to perform a chore that appears overwhelming, having too many changes in activity, or having too much going on at one time.

➤ *Does this child tantrum when you set a limit?*

Asking this child to join a group activity or

pick up toys when she doesn't want to may cause an outburst. Arrange your environment so that this child routinely helps herself to appropriate materials and helps to put them away. Place coat hooks at eye level, arrange materials so she can choose from what is available, and clearly mark where things go so she can put them away independently. Provide choices when possible. When you must set a limit, be firm. Remember not to take outbursts personally. Do not let her outbursts sway you. For more help coping with outbursts, see chapter 8, "You Can't Make Me: Power Struggles."

➤ *Does this child tantrum when she is denied an activity or an object she wants?*

Some children believe they will get what they want through their outbursts. When you deny this child something, for good reason, do not give in. Detach yourself from the situation by focusing on something else or walking away. Don't try to explain or talk with this child while she is upset. Ignore the outburst. Listen for a break in crying and watch for signals she is calming down. Move close to this child to offer comfort and support. When the tantrum is over, do not lecture. Help this child become engaged in an activity. If she brings up the difficult situation, problem solve how to handle it the next time it happens. Resist the temptation to ask this child, "Why did you get so upset?" Very few children have the verbal skills or sufficient understanding of their own behavior to explain it.

➤ *Is this child destructive or hurtful during a tantrum?*

When a child is destructive or hurtful, you may need to respond in ways that will protect people and property. Make sure you remain calm when dealing with a child who tantrums. Help all the other children move away. If another child is hurt, attend to her (instead of the one who is having a tantrum).

Tell the hurt child you are sorry it happened. Do not use the other child's name or blame them in any way. Stay near the child who is having a tantrum. Be aware of what she is doing while pretending to attend to something else. Once the tantrum stops, go to this child and sit near her without talking. When this child is ready, help her clean anything disrupted during the outburst. Then get her started in an activity. Some children want to be physically held once they have calmed down. Others fight it. Respect her choice.

► *Does this child seem locked into the tantrum or unable to stop?*

Some outbursts begin as an attempt to get what is wanted, others begin as the last straw in a frustrating or overwhelming day. However they begin, a child can become locked in. This child will need your help to stop. Prevent situations that lead to tantrums. If she gets stuck in tantrums frequently, you may need to intervene differently than previously recommended. Move to this child. Let her know you understand she is upset. Distract her to another activity. If she does get locked in and the tantrum lasts more than ten to fifteen minutes, tell her, "It's time to stop now." Help her take deep, relaxing breaths. Get more information about how to help a child who tantrums by taking a class or reading more about it.

Work with the Parent(s)

Many parents work with their children to teach them appropriate ways to get their

needs met. A few, however, give in to the child's demands and reinforce tantruming. You will not be able to control all the factors that keep temper tantrums going. Do what you can in your setting to be consistent and firm. Give the parent(s) the information that follows. Use the Plan for Action to discuss what you can do to work together. Consistency between home and the early childhood setting will give this child a clear message that there are times she cannot have her way.

When to Get Help

Suggest the child's parent(s) contact a parent educator or family counselor who specializes in working with young children if this child tantrums each time she is in a stressful situation or is denied her way; if the child's tantrums seem filled with extreme anger; or if you do not see a significant decrease in tantrums despite your efforts.

For Further Reading

- Kurcinka, Mary Sheedy. *Raising Your Spirited Child*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1991.
- McCarney, Stephen, and Angela Bauer. *The Parent's Guide*. Columbia, MO: Hawthorne Educational Services, 1989.
- Rubin, Douglas. *Bratbusters*. El Paso, TX: Skidmore-Roth Publishing, 1992.