



First Steps

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Tempering Temper Tantrums

Our children do not come with instructions. Parents Reaching Out provides resources that help families make informed decisions about the care and education of their children. We thank the Parent Education Network, a project of Parents Helping Parents of Wyoming, Inc. for permitting us to share their *Thoughts for Tots* in this information series.

“The terms ‘tantrum’ or ‘temper tantrum’ have been loosely used to describe much of children’s anger. A tantrum is an uncontrollable release of anger, lasting more than a few minutes, in which the child is doing one or more of the following: yelling, screaming, crying, kicking, biting, hitting, throwing, name-calling, or head-banging.

Tantrums are loud, sweaty, and physical. Children’s tantrums vary, yet anyone who has witnessed one can testify as to their intensity and inevitability. Tantrums are normal during the toddler years. A few children never have tantrums at all. Others continue having tantrums beyond [ages] three or four, but the tantrums generally diminish in frequency.”

Source: Davis, Laura and Janis Keyser. *Becoming the Parent You Want to Be*, 1997.

What Causes Temper Tantrums?

- Anger
- Frustration
- Tiredness
- Hunger
- Over stimulation



- Inability to communicate feelings
- Inability to communicate needs
- Changes in routines
- Not enough attention

What Can Parents Do to Prevent or Reduce Temper Tantrums?

- give your child some control over little things (orange or apple juice?)
- catch your child being good so you can reward positive behavior
- put “off-limits” objects out of sight and out of reach
- distract your child with another option or activity
- remove your child from the situation; change the environment
- hold your child closely and speak soothingly and calmly
- provide a nutritious snack
- ignore the behavior unless your child is in danger of hurting herself
- remain calm and in control of your own emotions

Temper tantrums are often the result of built-up anger and frustration. For children who cannot yet put into words what they are feeling or what they need, frustration tends to increase and the only thing they know to do is to throw a temper tantrum. Often, tantrums are a cry for help because the child has lost control and needs the gentle understanding and guidance of his parents to help him deal with the situation.



What is Important for Parents to Remember?

- **Keep your cool.** Don't cause more difficulties with your own frustration. Take deep breaths and stay calm.
- **Think clearly.** Your child needs you to be in control and to help her regain control of her own behavior.
- **Try to understand.** Review the situation and try to recognize the reason for your child's outburst. If he has suffered a great disappointment, you might need to provide comfort.
- **Ignore the behavior.** If the tantrum is the result of your child being refused something, and if the tantrum poses no threat to her or to others, pay no attention to it.
- **Keep things simple.** Try to avoid overloading your child with too many choices or activities.
- **Stick to a routine.** Children need regular sleeping and eating schedules. When they are rested and fed, they are more able to cope with changes or disappointments.
- **Speak slowly and softly.** Recognize your child's feelings and reassure her that you are there to help her. Raising your voice only makes matters worse and frightens your child.
- **Talk to your child.** Tell him how you expect him to behave or warn him of changes in plans so they don't come as a surprise to him.
- **Don't give in.** In a calm voice, explain why your child cannot have something or why he needs to change his behavior. Then, firmly—yet gently—see that he obeys.

For more information call Parents Reaching Out. We offer phone consultations and provide workshops in English or Spanish to communities throughout New Mexico. This publication was developed under a grant from the New Mexico Department of Health Family Infant Toddler program. However, the views here expressed do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Health and should not be assumed to be an endorsement by the New Mexico Department of Health.