

HOW TO HANDLE YOUR TODDLER'S TANTRUMS

What is a tantrum?

- A tantrum is an explosion of feelings but is also a communication by your child
- Children typically express their feelings through behavior

Toddlers don't say "I'm really upset that my cracker broke in two before I bit into it and I like my cracker whole because that is the way I am used to seeing it and I feel like my world has been turned upside down because my cracker broke in two" -- they just have a tantrum.

- Keep in mind that a child's perspective is different from an adult's

To an adult a broken cracker is no big deal or jelly coming out of the inside of a sandwich or fingers getting sticky but to many toddlers these are huge crises. So while the tantrum makes no sense in your reality, it makes perfect sense from your toddler's perspective.

When children have tantrums they are not having a tantrum...

- to drive their parents crazy (parents may feel this way as a result but not the intent of the child!)
- to humiliate their parents in public
- to make parents feel like lousy parents or
- because something is wrong with them

Reasons why toddlers have tantrums

- A toddler is tired
- A toddler is hungry
- A toddler is looking for attention
- A toddler feels powerless
- A toddler is testing the limits
- A toddler does not feel understood
- Looking for an excuse to cry

When your child has a tantrum you should...

- Accept how your child feels
- Figure out why your child is so upset
- Remember that your goal is NOT to get your child to stop having the tantrum
- Not give in to your child because they are having a tantrum

Helpful Responses

- Put your child's feelings into words. "You are so mad that mommy said we have to leave the playground now."
- Say out loud to child "it's okay to be mad, sad, frustrated..."
- Interpret child's feelings behind their behavior.
- Let child have their feelings & let child express their feelings (as long as not physically dangerous).
- Make sure child feels understood (even if setting a limit and saying no) "I understand that you are so mad at mommy because mommy said no ice cream before dinner and you really want ice cream right now."

How NOT to respond

- Tell child to stop crying
- Punish or threaten child
- Withdraw love or attention
- Distract to get child to stop expressing their emotion
- Bribe with food or sweets
- Tease or shame child
- Deny or minimize a child's pain
- Praise child for not crying
- Get child to talk instead of cry and express emotions
- Get child to laugh and be happy instead of allowing to be sad

Real Life Example

Asking your child to stop doing something fun like leaving a playground or playdate can cause a tantrum. So always prepare your child ahead of time for something potentially upsetting to them. Let's say you have told your child it's time to leave the playground and they don't want to. Acknowledge their feelings by saying "I know you really don't want to leave. I know it's hard. I know you want to do more swinging. (can try to distract with fantasy of doing activity they have to stop) Would you like to come back again?" "It's okay to be upset. It's okay to cry. I understand." And then just let your child be upset. Remember there is a beginning, middle and end to a tantrum if you allow the feelings to be released.

It's not helpful to minimize a child's feelings by saying "We'll be back tomorrow. If you don't stop crying I won't bring you back here tomorrow." You could say "Would you like to come back tomorrow? I know it's not the same as playing more now. What would you like to do first tomorrow?" and recognize that your child is likely exhausted, overtired and letting you know that so recognize that fact and get your child home, fed dinner, in bath and bed.