

10 Ways to Stop a Tantrum

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What are tantrums? Merriam-Webster defines tantrum as a "fit of bad temper". All children have them. I know plenty of adults who have a "fit of bad temper" as well on occasion. Never me. :-)

When you come to Mess For Less and get ideas for kids crafts and activities, you will see lots of photos of my happy and engaged children. If you don't know us personally, you might think things are always like that at my house. That is far from the truth. We deal with our fair share of meltdowns and temper tantrums. If you have a child of any age then chances are you have dealt with a tantrum or two as well. My kids are prone to them and some days are worse than others. Sometimes it just seems like they just wake up in a bad mood. Ever feel that way?

If you would like to purchase books that have helped me deal with tantrums, there is a list at the end of this post. Mess for Less receives a small portion of all sales. Thank you for supporting us!

From a child's perspective, what are temper tantrums good for? Clearly, tantrums allow children to express their frustrations, but they are also a way for children to get attention. With that in mind, here are some tips and techniques we have used (in no particular order) to help stop a tantrum and restore calm to the household. You will notice many of them involve diverting a child's attention.

1. Distraction

This is a pretty easy one to employ and it works great for those times a child is upset because you won't give them something they want. "I have to tell you/show you something!" I'll say in a very excited voice. Often, that's enough to stop the tears and pique their interest.

2. Counting

We used to think my daughter B could not control her temper and outbursts. I would often think "poor kid, she can't help it." When she would be having a fit about something (she didn't get the color cup she wanted at lunch) we started counting to three and told her that if we got to three, she would go to time out. She did not want to go to time out and so she would stop crying. It would be pretty funny to see this kid going from full blown fit to quiet. It looks like maybe she could control her outbursts after all. HmMMM...

3. Removing an item or privilege

In the midst of a meltdown, we say that we are going to take away something the child enjoys unless they can calm down. For example, "If you don't calm down and stop yelling then we will not go to the park later." Often the fear of losing something enjoyable can get kids back on track.

4. Deep breathing

Sometimes my daughters get so worked up about something that they forget to breathe and need to be reminded to do so. During calmer times, I have taught my kids how to take deep breaths and we will often do them together during a tantrum. This usually helps stop the crying and screaming on the part of the child, and truth be told, helps the parent calm down as well.

5. Tight Hugs

This goes hand in hand with the deep breathing. I find that a tight hug makes my child feel safe and they will often collapse into me since they are exhausted from the tantrum.

6. Quiet Spot

When one of my daughters was having frequent and severe tantrums, we established a "quiet spot" for her. We used a pack and play with pillows and a stuffed animal in it. Another option is a cozy corner in another room away from the action. Some pillows and stuffed animals help to diffuse the situation. We

would let my daughter tell us when she was ready to come out. Sometimes when she sensed herself becoming upset, she would ask to go to her quiet spot.

7. Music

You can incorporate this with the quiet spot or use it alone. Give the child some headphones to listen to some calming music or children's songs. While a child is having a tantrum it is difficult for them to stop it and break out of their mood. The music automatically changes the mood and the headphones shut out the outside environment.

8. Using quiet voices

I find that if I am raising my voice or yelling in attempt to get the tantrum to stop, it only escalates things. It seems totally unnatural when you have a screaming and crying child to speak in a quiet voice, but it does help by not adding fuel to the fire.

9. Talk it out

This works better with older children. I use this one with my twins who are almost 4. Sometimes the fit will start so suddenly that I have no idea what caused it. When that happens, I will take the child to another room, sit them on my lap and ask them why they are upset. When they tell me, I ask "what can I do to make you feel better?" I think it helps them to have a say in the solution. Sometimes the answer is a kiss, other times it's an apology from a sibling.

10. Walk away

Sometimes, despite your best efforts, nothing works. I have found that occasionally the best thing to do is nothing. Walk away and ignore. This is the hardest of all the options because it's agonizing to listen to your child be so upset. When I have walked away and stopped giving attention, I have noticed that within a few minutes (2-10 or longer depending on how strong willed the child is) the child will stop and join the rest of the family.

Do these suggestions always work? No. If you have a technique that always works please let me know! Heck, even if you have a tantrum stopping technique that only works some of the time, let me know in the comments below. Every child is different. What works for one may not work for another. Try a few of these tips and see which your child responds to best. Good luck and remember when in the midst of a tantrum, this too shall pass.

Here are my favorite parenting books which contain great advice for dealing with tantrums: Happiest Toddler on the Block, 1,2,3 Magic, The Emotional Life of the Toddler, Setting Limits with Your Strong Willed Child, Redirecting Children's Behavior, Boundaries with Kids

Don't forget to check out Part 2 - 10 MORE Ways to Stop a Tantrum with advice from our readers! For more parenting tips check out Is There Something Wrong With My Child and Letting Kids Work it Out. **No child was harmed in the writing of this post. The photo above of my youngest was taken when she was told that she could not have a third refill of juice.*

About "Mess For Less": *I was a teacher for close to 10 years before having my kids. I taught Preschool, Kindergarten, First and Fourth grade. You would think this prepared me for raising 3 kids. Not so much. Turns out, other people's kids listen to me a lot more than my own. Plus, just when they were getting annoying (yes, teachers occasionally think students are annoying) their parents would come and pick them up. No one picks my kids up. There is nowhere to escape - except maybe the bathroom. I got my Masters in Early Childhood Education so I do know a bit about teaching and learning. But there is no degree that could have prepared me for having 3 kids in 18 months (twins + 1 for those keeping score). Those kids are now 5 and 4 years old and though lots of days they drive me crazy, there are those occasional moments of peace and bliss thrown in that keep me from heading for the hills. The other thing that keeps me from going out for milk and never returning is my awesome husband. He is all the good stuff a husband and person should be.*

10 MORE Ways to Stop a Tantrum

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Back in May, I wrote a post called 10 Ways to Stop a Tantrum. In this post I talked about what are tantrums and how we can stop them. This post has been very popular and I believe one of the reasons for its popularity is that all parents can relate to it. We have all been in the position of trying to console a child who is having a tantrum. I offered some tips that have worked for our family and was thrilled that so many readers commented with their own tips that have been helpful for them. I know some readers don't always read all the comments in a post, so I wanted to summarize the great reader advice here. Thanks to all the wonderful readers who commented and shared! Read on for more great ideas...

Obviously there are times when your child is genuinely upset and hurt about something and those are wonderful opportunities to bond, label their feelings and discuss possible solutions. These tips are more for the times that a child is crying about something minor (you won't give them a second cookie, something has not gone their way, etc...).

Here are the 10 MORE ways to stop a tantrum from the Mess For Less readers:

1. Removal from a setting

One reader found that simply removing her child from an area where they were having a tantrum was enough to get them back on track. This works especially well when the child was playing with others when the tantrum occurred. Most children don't want to be taken away from play or friends.

One mom said that when they have tried everything else and the anger and tantrum still persists, they tell the child they can continue to be angry but they need to do it in their room. I like how this does not deny the child their feelings, but allows them to have a safe place to feel them.

2. Eye Contact

One reader swears by asking her son to make eye contact with her. This helps the child to focus and regroup and sometimes when he is looking at her she may even be making a funny face which helps break the tension.

3. Keeping little hands busy

Silly putty to help calm down? One Mess For Less reader says it works for her child. She tries either silly putty or play dough and finds that the stretching and smooshing helps the child to feel calm. The concept sounds similar to a stress ball so I can see how this would be effective. I bet pounding the putty or play dough would feel good for little ones dealing with anger.

4. Use humor

I love the suggestion by the mom who said when their little ones are having a crying fit she gets out a little spoon and tries to catch their tears. The kids usually stop crying right then and there because they are so interested in seeing their tears.

5. Modeling

This one really hit home for me. One mom reminded us that we must display calm behavior when stressed so we can model for our kids how we want them to react. Obviously, a two year old has a lot less impulse control than an adult (well, most adults anyway), but as they grow they should always have a model of how they can behave. This is the toughest for me as I don't always have the best reactions when stressed.

6. Turn on the camera

Sometimes when a child flies into a rage they have no idea or recollection of how they have behaved. This prompted one mom to video tape her child having a tantrum. She is quick to point out that she did

this silently without ridicule. After the tantrum had resolved, they would watch the video and talk about what happened. She said that after 5 or 6 times of doing this his tantrums went away.

7. Take a drink

A reader who worked at a camp said that they would ask upset campers to drink some water as they could not cry and drink at the same. This usually stopped the children from crying so they could talk about what was upsetting them.

8. Food related

Another suggestion I got from a few moms is to investigate whether the tantrum might be related to a dietary issue. One mom mentioned hypoglycemia as a possibility, and another talked about food allergies. It might be worth looking into if the temper tantrum problem is not resolved by any other means. Along those lines, sometimes just being hungry can throw a kid off. Think about the last time they ate and what they consumed.

9. Positive attention

Giving her daughter lots of positive attention and praise when she is exhibiting desired behaviors works well for one reader. I mean to do this more, but sometimes when things are peaceful and happy I take it for granted and end up giving much more attention for unwanted behaviors which only perpetuates them.

10. Glitter Jar

I can't wait to try this one. One reader talked about making a snow globe type jar using glitter and shaking it up and have the child sit still watching until all the glitter has settled. The child is typically concentrating on the glitter that they forget all about the tantrums.

So there you have it. Between this post and the original 10 Ways to Stop a Tantrum, you now have 20 ideas to try out. Not everything will work with every child, and something that works Monday may not work on Tuesday. But I love having lots of options and tricks up my sleeve. Thanks to my clever readers I have a bunch of new ideas to try out.

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