

Dealing with tantrums

Factsheet for parents and teachers

About this factsheet

This is one in a series of factsheets for parents, teachers and young people entitled *Mental Health and Growing Up*. The aims of these factsheets are to provide practical, up-to-date information about mental health problems (emotional, behavioural and psychiatric disorders) that can affect children and young people. This factsheet looks at the reasons behind why children have tantrums and gives practical advice about how to deal with them.



Introduction

It is important for adults to understand that between the ages of one and four years, most children have tantrums.

All toddlers want to do things for themselves. They want to dress themselves, feed themselves, pour their own juice and generally be more independent. They can get very upset if they find that they can't do what they are trying to do or if their parent/carer stops them. This upset can lead to a tantrum.

How can I cope with tantrums?

Your child's screams and yells can be alarming. You may feel angry and will almost certainly be embarrassed in front of other people. But remember, children learning to deal with their emotions is a normal part of growing up.

During the tantrum

Don't panic

The main thing to do is to stay calm and not to get upset yourself. Just remind yourself that this is normal, that lots of parents have to deal with it, and that you will too.

Try to distract them

If you are in a situation where you know a tantrum is likely, you may be able to avoid one by distracting your child; e.g. point out the big red sports car in the road, laugh at the funny picture in the shop display or give them their favourite toy to play with.

Remember what you are trying to do

You are trying to teach your child that rules are important and that you will stick to them (see Factsheet 2 on good parenting skills).

Ignore the tantrum

You should calmly continue with whatever you are doing – chatting to someone else, packing your shopping or whatever. Every so often check to make sure your child is safe. Ignoring your child is very hard, but if you answer back, or even smack them, you are giving them the attention they are demanding.

Pay attention to any good behaviour

As soon as you see any signs of calming down, e.g. they stop screaming, praise them. Turn your full attention back to the child, talk to them with warmth and admiration. If you reward the new behaviour like this, your child is more likely to stay calm and carry on being good.

Tips for avoiding tantrums

Tantrums often happen in predictable situations. Children find it hard to wait. Make it easier for them by:

- taking their favourite books and toys to the doctor's surgery
- storing their favourite biscuits out of sight, rather than where they can see them
- sticking to your rules.

Your child may be particularly difficult at certain times of the day – perhaps when they are tired or hungry. Simple arrangements may help. They could:

- have an afternoon nap, instead of staying awake all day
- have a snack after nursery at 3.30 p.m., instead of having to wait until 5.00 p.m. for tea.

Where can I get help?

It is often very helpful to talk to other parents or friends. If this doesn't help and if the tantrums are getting you down, it may be worth having a chat with your health visitor or general practitioner. They will be able to give advice or suggest more specialist help.

References

- Carr, A. (ed.) (2000) *What Works with Children and Adolescents? A Critical Review of Psychological Interventions with Children, Adolescents and their Families*. London: Brunner-Routledge.
- Rutter, M. & Taylor, E. (eds) (2002) *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* (4th edn). London: Blackwell.
- Scott, A., Shaw, M. & Joughin, C. (2001) *Finding the Evidence: A Gateway to the Literature in Child and Adolescent Mental Health* (2nd edn). London: Gaskell.

Sources of further information

- Green, C (2003) *New Toddler Taming: A Parent's Guide to the First Four Years*. London: Vermilion.
- The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) produces helpful information for parents and carers. Weston House, 42 Curtain Road, London EC2A 3NH; www.nspcc.org.uk
- Newpin (New Parent Information Network) offers support to parents with babies and toddlers. Sutherland House, 35 Sutherland Square, Walworth, London SE17 3EE; tel: 020 7358 5900; www.newpin.org.uk.
- Webster Stratton, C. (1992) *The Incredible Years: A Troubleshooting Guide for Parents of Children Aged 3–8*. London: Umbrella Press.
- www.incredibleyears.com is an American website with research-based and effective programmes for reducing children's aggression and behaviour and increasing their social skills.
- The *Mental Health and Growing Up* series contains 36 factsheets on a range of common mental health problems. To order the pack contact Book Sales at the Royal College of Psychiatrists, 17 Belgrave Square, London SW1X 8PG; tel. 020 7235 2351, ext. 146; fax 020 7245 1231; e-mail: booksales@rcpsych.ac.uk, or you can download them from www.rcpsych.ac.uk.