

# Coping with children's tantrums



**West Lothian Child and Adolescent  
Mental Health Services  
(CAMHS)**

# Coping with tantrums

## Introduction

Does your child have tantrums? Lots of children do, and in fact it is perfectly normal at some ages. This handout is designed to help you to cope with them while your child is at that stage and to help your child grow out of them. Most 2- 4 year olds have lots of tantrums, and some older children go on having them. You probably know other families with the same problem.

## Why do children have tantrums?

In **younger** children of about 2-4 years, tantrums are very common and a normal part of development. This is because:

- Toddlers feel things very strongly
- They have learned to say 'no' and want to try it out
- They are beginning to know about rules and want to fight them
- They are impatient and want things **now**
- They are selfish
- They are finding out that they have power too, not just adults.

All of these things, although unpleasant and a nuisance, are entirely normal at this age. Many parents worry that their child has a Jekyll & Hyde personality because he can be an angel one moment and a little monster the next. It's all quite normal, even though it's hard to live with.

Some **older** children still have tantrums even though they have learned to be more patient and to follow rules. This is probably because they have learned that tantrums can have good effects. Anything your child does which gets him something he likes is likely to be done again. A tantrum might:

- Make an adult give in, and give the sweets he wanted
- Get an audience, which is fun
- Upset an adult, which gives the child a real sense of power
- Get mum or dad to stop work and pay attention by trying to reason with him.

# Handling tantrums

## 1. Keeping records

Sometimes when you're struggling with a problem like this, it can seem like the tantrums are happening 'all the time' and that nothing you do makes any difference.

It can help to spend some time writing down the details of the tantrums so that you can study it and try to see patterns. For example, does it happen mostly when your child is tired, or when granny is around, or only at weekends, or when he is bored? You might already be able to answer some of these, but writing things down can show up other things that maybe you hadn't noticed.

Parents often have lots of useful information about the tantrums but don't really know how to sort it out into a useful order. Here are some ideas about what to write down:

- a) **Triggers** - how does it build up? What was happening in the few minutes leading up to the tantrum?
- b) **During** - write down everything about the tantrum - how long was it, how bad, where did it happen, who was there, and so on.
- c) **After** - what did you do about it? What was the end result?

Here is a useful form to use. You might want to make a bigger one.

DAY	Who was there?	Triggers	Describe the tantrum	What did you do about it?
TIME				

Try to fill in a form like this for every tantrum for one week before you start to change anything. Have a good look at it and try to work out if there is a pattern. What are the 'danger times'? Does it make a difference how you handle it?

Many parents notice that nice things happen to their child during or after a tantrum. This may be that the parent gives in 'for peace and quiet', or gives lots of angry attention (which can be quite fun for the child), or gives the child a hug to calm him down. These nice things might be keeping the tantrums going. Are you doing any of these? Any nice thing happening after a child behaves a certain way will make him want to behave that way again. It might be that, by accident, you are 'rewarding' the tantrums by giving him something that he finds nice.

## ***2. Use lots of praise for good behaviour***

You probably feel like punishing your child for having a tantrum. If that doesn't work, you might feel like thinking of a bigger punishment which will work. By now, however, you might have found out that punishment usually doesn't work. This is because it means giving the child 'angry attention' and attention is what all children love to get. Even bad attention is better than none. So the more you punish and shout, the more the tantrums! Some parents find this hard to believe, but children can find shouting and fuss rewarding, especially if it's hard for them to get your attention any other way.

So instead of punishing, do exactly the opposite. Try to catch your child being good. This may feel like hard work, and many parents say their child 'never does anything good'. Look for tiny things that you can praise - maybe he plays with his brother quietly for two minutes, or carries a cup into the kitchen, or gets dressed by himself, or manages to do up his trousers properly after going to the toilet. All children do little good things like this - your job is to notice them and **praise**.

Pretend that you're wearing rose-tinted spectacles and try to notice all the good moments in the day. There might be only one or two tantrums each day but lots of times when nothing is really going wrong.

If you can praise your child for being good, he will like this (even if he seems to be embarrassed or pretends not to be interested) and he will probably want to get your good attention by behaving this way again. That way, there will be less time for tantrums!

Some parents think that children should behave well, so when their child is good, the parents don't say anything nice or encouraging - they just think the children should be this way without any special praise. However, if you ignore children like this when they're good, then they will start to behave badly to get you to pay attention. So use lots of praise all day long for little good things.

All humans (and animals too) repeat behaviours which get rewarded. For example, you buy birthday presents because it is rewarding to see pleasure when you give them (and you might get one in return on your birthday!). You do the washing and ironing because it is rewarding to know that everyone has fresh, clean clothes. You go to work because you get paid. You cook tasty meals because it is rewarding to eat well.

### **Types of reward**

Some rewards are things you can see, like money, sweets, clothes, toys or privileges. It is also rewarding to get praise from other people. Many rewards that adults give themselves are 'self-rewards' of a pat on your own back, the satisfaction of a job well done, the knowledge that you are doing right, and so on. Children have not learned to give themselves this last type of reward, and rely on you giving them things they can see or praise.

First, here are some words about praise, and later on we will talk more about other kinds of reward. The best way to use **praise** is:

- Give it right away after the good behaviour
- Sound like you really mean it - don't be half-hearted about it
- Say exactly why you are praising
- Try giving the behaviour a label (helpful, kind, artistic)
- Praise often
- Praise little improvements in behaviour - don't expect a miracle all at once
- Vary your praise from time to time.

So you might say:

- 'Well done Jane, I'm glad that you took your mug into the kitchen. That was really helpful.'
- 'Good boy, Peter. You put your toys in the box when I asked you. That's what I call tidy!'
- 'That's an excellent drawing. I like all those bright colours. That's very artistic!'

At other times, you might just say 'well done' or 'thanks' or 'good girl.' Vary your praise.

### **3. Rewards**

Another way to encourage good behaviour is to give a reward as well as praise. If a child is rewarded after behaving a certain way, he'll be more likely to behave that way again.

A reward can be anything which your child likes getting - not something you'd like. Adults often guess wrongly about what children would like for treats – so ask. A reward doesn't have to be anything expensive. It could be:

- A hug
- Being read a story
- A few raisins or apple pieces
- A few minutes with a favourite game
- A few sweets
- A walk to the swings
- Pencils or crayons
- Choosing a favourite pudding
- Watching TV for a short time
- Playing a game with you
- Anything else your child likes.

Using rewards is quite like using praise and you can follow the same rules as above. To repeat:

- You might promise a reward and say what he has to do to get it
- After the good behaviour, give the reward immediately
- Tell the child why he's being rewarded
- Give lots of tiny rewards often, rather than a big one at the end of the week. 30 hugs, words of praise and tiny rewards throughout the day are better than promising a big reward next weekend.

You can use praise and rewards to encourage a child to learn something new or to behave in a new way. Break the new skill down into little steps and reward him for managing to do first one step, then two steps, and so on.

For example, suppose that you want Jane to get dressed by herself without having her usual tantrum.

1. You could give her a small reward of 10 Smarties if she manages to put on her vest, and you could finish dressing her. Once she is good at putting on her vest after a few days, move on to step 2.
2. Ask Jane to put on vest and pants before she gets her Smarties.
3. A few days later, she might must do vest, pants and jumper to get the reward.

Don't expect children to be able to do new things all at once - always try to break new tasks down into small steps.

#### **4. Charts**

Using a chart is another way to combine praise and rewards. It allows you to put marks (ticks, happy faces, etc) on the paper if your child did well at something. Many parents have tried some kind of star chart in the past, often without much success. This might have been for two reasons: firstly that the reward was not interesting enough for the child, or secondly because the target behaviour was just too hard for him. It is worth trying again, and persevering till you find a system that works because:

- You can give the mark right away with very little effort

- Being awarded marks can be very encouraging to most children
- Giving a mark saves you having to think of lots of rewards
- Marks can be saved up to 'buy' a bigger reward
- You and your child can both see at a glance how he is getting on.

Here is an example:

Suppose that we decided to use a chart as well as praise and rewards to get Jane to dress without having a tantrum. We might have a place on the chart for:

- 1) the day
- 2) whether she managed to put on her vest alone
- 3) whether she did this without a fuss.

It could look like this:

	VEST ON?	WITHOUT FUSS?	PRIZE?
Monday	YES		
Tuesday	YES	YES	SWEETS
Wednesday			
Thursday	YES	YES	STORY
Friday	YES	YES	SWINGS
TOTAL	4	3	3

You can see that this is a simple chart, but here are one or two points to note:

- It is best to mark only the good behaviour on the chart - just leave a blank space if your child did not do what was required. Some people want to put a cross, or a sad face, or 'bad' for these times, but it's best just to leave those boxes empty and mark only the good times on the chart.



- Instead of writing **yes** in the boxes, you could stick a star on, or get your child to draw something in that box, or put a tick there - or anything else you can think of.
- We have decided to use a reward as well as the chart. If Jane puts her vest on and does it without fuss, she can get a prize, and in the last column of the chart it shows what reward she chose on the days when she deserved one. Some days she might have her 10 Smarties, but other days she could choose something else.
- For older children, you might promise another, bigger reward if they manage to do well for, say three or four days in the week. Don't make the target too hard or the child won't manage it. Better to make it too easy to start with then make it harder as time goes on. Once she can do four days a week without too much trouble, make the target five days, then six and so on.
- Be inventive about charts - you can design them for any purpose. It is often a good idea to get your child to colour it or draw a border round the edge, so that he feels involved.

Here's another example. Let's suppose that Brian has a tantrum at every meal time. Pretend we already know from our 'diary' that the most he can be quiet during meals is two minutes.

We want to break down mealtimes into little steps, because there's no chance we can get Brian to be quiet for a whole mealtime right away. If he can already do two minutes, then let's set him the target of keeping quiet for three minutes. If he can do three minutes, he'll get a mark on his chart.

You will see over the page that we have also added a 'prize' to the chart if Brian gets three marks (out of a possible nine) that day. Once he has had a few days of getting the prize, we can make it harder and say that he has to get four marks for a prize, and so on.

Putting marks on a chart is like giving a reward right away. It is just a different type of reward. You should fill in the chart at the time, not later on in the day. Children are often very proud of their charts, especially if they were involved in drawing it. They often like to show them off to visiting relatives.

The chart could look like this:

MONDAY	BREAKFAST	first 3 minutes	<input type="text"/>
		next 3 minutes	<input type="text"/>
		last 3 minutes	<input type="text"/>
	LUNCH	first 3 minutes	<input type="text"/>
		next 3 minutes	<input type="text"/>
		last 3 minutes	<input type="text"/>
	TEA	first 3 minutes	<input type="text"/>
		next 3 minutes	<input type="text"/>
		last 3 minutes	<input type="text"/>
PRIZE: 3 marks = a prize			

## 5. Avoiding tantrums

Even though you use lots of praise and rewards, you will still get some tantrums, especially at first.

Once you have kept records of the tantrums, you will have a good idea when the 'danger times' are, and perhaps you can try to avoid some of these.

For example, if John is most likely to have a tantrum at 6pm when he's hungry is it worth thinking about having tea earlier so he doesn't get so hungry? If Jane has tantrums mostly when you say **no**, then can you try to avoid that word? Instead say 'yes, after tea' or 'I'm afraid not' or 'not today' - or anything else you can think of which means **no** but without actually saying **no**.

Perhaps you can't avoid the danger times, and you know that a tantrum is likely to happen. In this case, try reminding the child what he should be doing and promise a reward if he behaves as you ask.

For example, pretend that Peter often has tantrums at the checkout in the supermarket. Ideally you would shop without him, but maybe you've got no choice but to take him there. When you get to the checkout, say: 'Peter, I want you to help me unload the shopping from the trolley, and if you do that quietly you can have a bag of crisps on the way home.'

Or you might say to Ann, who often has a tantrum when you've got visitors in: 'I want you to play quietly for 10 minutes while I talk to my friend, then we will all play Snakes and Ladders together'.

## **6. Dealing with tantrums**

There will be times when you have to deal with tantrums, even though you have tried to use praise, rewards, and tried to avoid the danger times. This is what you do:

i. If you feel that it is safe, then **ignore** your child while he is having a tantrum. Try not to look (or at least pretend you're not looking), don't say anything, and maybe pick up a newspaper or go out of the room to do something else. It would be hard to do this in the supermarket, or the kitchen with saucepans on the cooker, and so on, so there will be times when it is not safe to leave your child while he is having a tantrum. But if you can, then try ignoring it. If you do this, you will be depriving him of the attention he likes getting. Chances are, he'll follow you around the house, trying to get you to pay attention. Try to stick to your guns and ignore him.

ii. If you can't ignore a tantrum, then use **Time Out**. This means removing your child from everyone else so that he doesn't get the audience he wants. This is how to do it:

- Choose a Time Out place which is somewhere boring in the house, like the hallway or landing
- At the first sign of a tantrum, warn your child that if he doesn't stop, you will remove him
- If he stops, fine. Praise him for doing as he was told
- If he carries on with the tantrum, **act**. Don't threaten or argue with him - just lead or carry him to your Time Out place. Do this quietly and **calmly**; remember, he wants you to get upset and shout, so don't give him the satisfaction

- Remind him that he has to stay there for five minutes (no longer) until he is quiet. If he carries on making a fuss, repeat the reminder after a few minutes
- You might have to stay with him to make sure he doesn't run away from the Time Out place. While you are doing this, don't pay your child any attention. Don't talk to him or argue. You might keep a magazine handy so you can read while watching your child out of the corner of your eye
- As soon as he is quiet for five minutes, allow him out
- Praise and reward the next good thing he does
- Afterwards, don't go on about the tantrum. Just be pleasant and friendly. Some parents bear grudges and go on being in a bad mood long after try not to do this.

When you use time out, you are trying not to give your attention for having a tantrum. Instead, make sure he gets plenty of good attention at the times he is behaving well by using praise and rewards as much as you can.

### ***7. Keep writing the diary***

Remember, we started by keeping a 'diary' for a week before making any changes. It is worth carrying on with your diary after you have started to use the ideas in this booklet. You might want to make it simpler - perhaps just counting how many tantrums happen each day and writing it down. That way you can see how things have improved as time goes by and it can be quite cheering later on to look back at your diary from the early days!

### **How soon can I expect improvement?**

When you change the way that you manage a child's behaviour, you might find that things get worse first of all before they get better. It is tempting to give up at that point when things seem bad, but try not to.

It gets worse at first because your child is used to getting angry attention when he has a tantrum. If you stop giving it, he will try to have bigger, supertantrums to get you to pay attention.

If you can stick to your new plan, keeping calm and using time out, he will eventually realise that you have changed and there is no point in having tantrums. Things will start to get better from then on.

Remember that it has taken months or even years to get to this point, so don't expect a miracle overnight. You will start to see little improvements quite quickly if you are patient and stick to the plan, but it might take a few weeks for everyone in the family to get used to the new way of doing things.

Some parents see big improvements in just a week or two - it all depends on your child and how determined and patient you are at trying the ideas in this booklet. They will work more quickly if all the adults in the house can handle tantrums the same way.

## **Some last words**

The ideas in this booklet have been tried and tested by many parents. Hopefully, if you keep at it, they will work for you too. However, all children are different and you might need to change some of these ideas to suit your family. Ask for help if you want from the person who gave you this booklet.

## **Summary**

- Lots of children have tantrums
- Start by keeping a 'diary'
- Use lots of praise and rewards
- Beware the danger times
- Try to ignore tantrums, or use time out
- Stick to the plan
- Keep up the diary.

Further copies of this booklet may be obtained from

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