

Root Causes of Tantrums

Children often have tantrums because their brains cannot fully process big emotions, like sadness or anger. They may not have words to express how they are feeling, which can be frustrating.

It is important to figure out what is causing a tantrum to help you decide what strategy is best to address it. Children may have tantrums if certain needs (root causes) aren't being met.



Use this chart to learn about **root causes of tantrums** and what you can do to help them:

Root Causes	What You Might See	What You Can Do	Helpful Hints
Hunger	Whining about an activity you suggest even though the child normally likes it.	Say, "I think it's snack time. Would you like apple with peanut butter, or a slice of turkey with cheese?"	Ignore the behavior itself. Respond to source of the tantrum (hunger).
Wanting/Needing Attention	Throwing themselves on the ground while you are on the phone.	When you're off the phone, offer to play your child's favorite game, or have cuddle time together. Let your child choose.	Kids need attention and aren't being selfish at this age. Healthy attention helps them learn to have strong, happy relationships with others!
Tired	Crying and swatting your hand away when you are trying to offer food.	Say, "It's been a long day. I think it would feel good for both of us to lie down and relax. Lay next to me on the couch. We can take a nap or listen to music."	Offering food when the root cause is tiredness may not make sense. This is why figuring out the root cause is important.
Overwhelmed	Your child is crying uncontrollably.	Rub their back. Talk to them softly. Try a "time-in" engaging activity.	Your child's brain is still developing. Sometimes feelings are too big for them to handle. It helps to acknowledge the root cause and explain: "I can tell when you're upset. It's okay to be upset."

Calming Tips for Parents

Parents often feel many of their own emotions while their children are having tantrums. Maybe it's been a long day and you're tired. Maybe you're stressed about a relationship in your life, or frustrated with your child in that moment. It is normal to experience your own emotions.

Be aware of how these emotions may impact your children. Children learn from how adults around them react. Model the kinds of reactions you want your child to have. How we respond when we are overwhelmed is what our kids look at when learning how to respond to big feelings. If your child is crying or upset, and you're finding yourself upset, it's okay to put them in their crib or in the other room and take a second to calm down before reacting.

Ways to Calm Down:

During a Tantrum: Try these techniques during a tantrum to keep yourself calm.

Try breathing exercises. Notice your breath and how it feels. Breathe in for 5 seconds. Hold for 5 seconds, then breathe out. Think about something you love about your child as you breathe in. Hold that thought as you hold your breath. As you breathe out, think about something you want to let go of in that moment.

Repeat different mantras to yourself, such as:

- "I can model how I want my child to act right now."
- "I'm not in danger. It's just my child having a tantrum."

Ask for help when you need it from other caregivers or adults. Name what you are feeling. Describe what is happening. Ask for what you need in that moment. Reflect later on. Here's an example:

- "I am feeling overwhelmed right now. Charlie is throwing food all over the room and screaming nonstop, and I need a second to breathe. Can you please take him out of his highchair while I leave the room for a minute?"

Reminder: it takes a village! No one can do it on their own. It's okay to ask for help.

After a Tantrum: Try these techniques to try to relax more and help you stay calm next time.

Listen to quiet music. Focus on listening to the music and following the beat. Tap your foot along with the beat to connect with what you are hearing.

Do something you enjoy. Try coloring or play with clay. Focus on repetitive strokes to take your mind off of worry.

Try simple yoga poses, such as:



Child's pose



Forward bend


If you are having trouble managing your stress or anxiety on your own, please let your child's provider or a Healthy Steps Development Specialist know.

Scripts for Handling Tantrums

Sometimes it can be useful to have a script to help us respond to a tantrum. There are some differences for how to handle emerging tantrums and active tantrums:

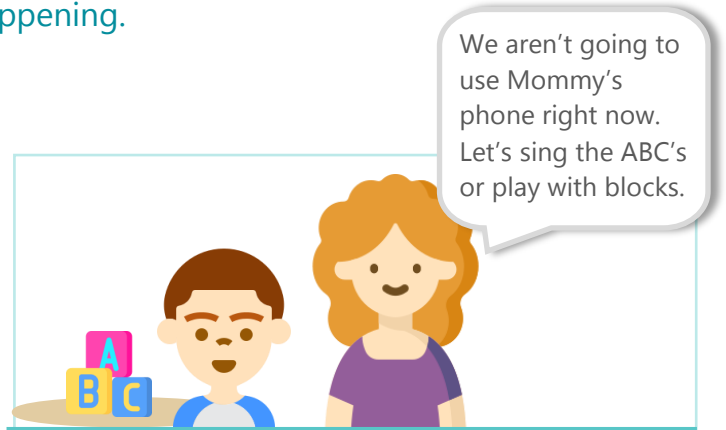
- **Emerging tantrums** are ones that are about to happen.
- **Active tantrums** are ones that are already happening.

How to Handle Emerging Tantrums:



It's okay to be mad that I took the phone away. Phone time is done for today.

Label and confirm what your child is feeling.
Explain the rule or time limit briefly.



We aren't going to use Mommy's phone right now. Let's sing the ABC's or play with blocks.

Limit saying no and redirect your child's attention. If your child is doing something you don't want them to do, try telling them something they should do instead. Saying "no" too often makes it less meaningful. Save saying "no" for dangerous situations.

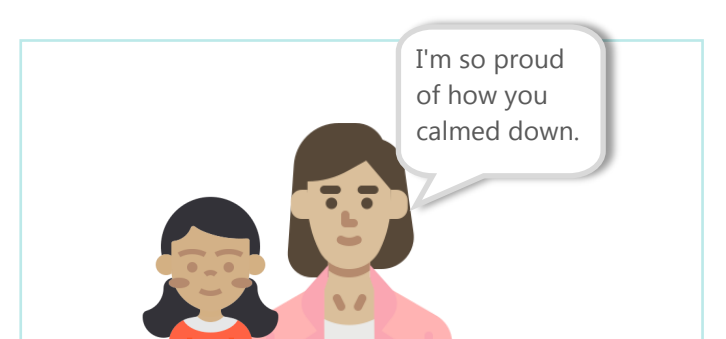
How to Handle Active Tantrums:

We want to make sure children have their space to work through how they are feeling. We also want them to know that we are there to love them and help them handle their feelings if they need or want it. It is important to name their emotions so they know it is okay to have big feelings.



I can tell you're upset I took the phone away. It's okay to be upset. I'm not going anywhere.

Label and confirm what your child is feeling.
Hold the limit and offer comfort while giving them space. Don't pick up or touch your child unless they approach for comfort, as this may make the tantrum worse.
Don't give into the tantrum once it has started.



I'm so proud of how you calmed down.

Always reconnect with your child afterward.
Welcome and comfort them when they approach.
Praise them for calming down.

Remember: It is not your job to fix tantrums. Support your child and help them learn how to process through their big feelings.

Time-In and Time-Out

Why do we use time-in and time-out?

When children misbehave and parents try to correct them, emotions can get heightened. These steps allow the parent and child time to cool down.

- **Time-in** works well in situations where the child has trouble soothing themselves on their own. It works best when the parent is calm and can be there emotionally for the child. Parents use age-appropriate strategies to help the child calm down, because they're too young to do it all on their own. Time-in can be used for children 18 months to 5 years old.
- **Time-outs** should be used in response to bad behavior that has been corrected many times but hasn't gotten better. Time-out can also be used to correct aggressive behavior like hitting, biting, and kicking during tantrums.

How do we use time-in?

Examples: Hold your child and rub their back. Talk softly to them. Do whatever works for your child. Try different activities with your child, such as:

For 2-year olds: Play with toys. Take them on a walk in a stroller. Take them to the playground or park. Give them a bath. Sing songs with them. Read a book to them.

For 3-4 year olds: Play with playdough or dry spaghetti. Fill a table with books and read. Take a walk and hunt for colors. Play with puzzles.

For 5-year olds: Make a batch of homemade playdough. Go on a nature walk and collect leaves or rocks. Read a children's book out loud together. Build a fort out of blankets and pillows.

When do we use time-outs?

If time-in doesn't work, try time-out. Use time-out if your child is:

- Being physically aggressive, such as hitting others.
- Doing dangerous behaviors, such as running into the street.
- Hurting another child's feelings.
- Breaking the rules and not following your directions after 1 or 2 warnings.

Time-out warnings can help your child learn to follow your family's rules. Use 1 or 2 warnings depending on the situation and your comfort level:

- If they are doing something dangerous, give them a time-out after the first warning is ignored.
- If they aren't paying attention, and you want to give them a chance to get it right on their own, give them an extra warning.

Example: You ask your child to put away their toys before dinner. They continue playing after you pause to give them time to put away their toys.

Time-out warning 1: "If you don't put your toys away, you will have to go to time-out."

You pause as your child begins to put their toys away. After they pick up their toys, you say: "Thank you for listening and putting your toys away."

Time-In and Time-Out

How do we use time-out?

Time-outs should be used to give children and parents a chance to calm down and reset. The focus of time-outs should be on sticking to the rules, not punishing the child. **Here are some helpful tips for using time-outs with your child:**

Setting rules for time-out:

- **Explain what time-out is to your child** so they know what to expect. Consider practicing time-out when you and your child are in a good mood to help them better understand it.
- **Rename time-out to “pauses” or “breaks”** so that it is less scary for your child.
- **Set a time limit (no more than 1 minute for each year of age).** For example, for a 2 year old, have them be in time-out for 2 minutes or less; for a 3 year old, 3 minutes or less.
- **Use the same spot in the house for time-outs every time.** If this is not possible, keep the same setting (such as always having the child sit on a chair or rug).

During time-outs:

- **Take away any forms of entertainment.** Do not give them toys or attention during time-out.
- **Show them the timer and set it.** Explain to them that they must stay in time-out until the timer goes off. Let them know that you will restart the timer every time they get up until they complete the whole time-out.
- **If your child won't go to time-out, take away the object that is causing the problem** (such as the phone). Let them have a security object, such as a stuffed animal or pacifier to help calm them down during time-out.



After time-outs:

- **Don't ask your child if they thought about what they had done.** The purpose of time-out is not to have them sit and think about what they did wrong, but to help them calm down.
- **Let them help fix the situation.** For example, saying sorry to the person they hit or cleaning up a mess they made. Praise them for the good behavior and move onto the next activity.

Talk with your child's provider or a Healthy Steps Development Specialist if you have more questions!