



Tantrums Summary

Why Tantrums?

Three-to-four-year-olds are in the earliest stages of learning about their strong feelings. They do not understand the full body takeover that can occur when they are angry, hurt, or frustrated. A sense of a lack of control can be scary and add to the length and intensity of their upset. Tantrums are normal. Learning how to deal with anger or upset without choosing destructive responses is critical, and your support and guidance as a parent or someone in a parenting role matter greatly.

Tip These steps are done best when you and your child are not tired or in a rush.

Tip Intentional communication and a healthy parenting relationship support these steps.

Step 1. Get Your Child Thinking by Getting Their **Input**

- Before you can get input from your child to understand (and help them understand) what they are feeling, you both need to be calm. Your child will not learn from the situation if you or they are upset.
 - Ask yourself if your child is hungry or tired. You could offer a snack or transition to a nap.
 - Check on how you are feeling. If you are angry, frustrated, or overwhelmed, take a “parenting time out” and take several deep breaths (it really does help) or sit quietly for a few minutes.
 - If basic needs like hunger or tiredness are not issues for your child, then take additional steps to help them calm down. This might involve offering a hug, helping them take deep breaths, or holding a blanket or stuffed animal.
- When both you and your child are calm, reflect on your child’s feelings so you can be prepared to help. Ask yourself:
 - “Does my child have an unmet need?” They might need someone to listen or give them attention, some alone time, or some help so they can be successful at something they are trying to do.

- You can ask them about how they are feeling.
 - *"I noticed your face got really red and your forehead got all scrunched up. So, when you threw the toy, were you feeling frustrated?"*
 - *"I saw you dropped your popsicle on the ground. I wonder if you are feeling sad?"*
 - At bedtime, if they seem to be stalling by asking for another drink or a snack, you could ask, *"Are you feeling scared?"*
- You can also ask them about how they think others might be feeling.
 - *"Your sister cried when you took the toy. What do you think she is feeling?"*
 - *"When your friend didn't get to take their turn, how do you think they were feeling?"*
 - *"When you said that to me, how do you think that made me feel?"*
- If your child has recently thrown a tantrum, then use that example to reflect on what caused it at a time when you are both calm: *"What made you so upset at the grocery store?"*
- Use your best listening skills! Remember, what makes a parent angry or upset can differ greatly from what angers or upsets a child.
- Explore the mind-body connection. In calmer moments with your child, ask, *"How does your body feel now?"* See how descriptively they can list their physical signs of wellbeing. Now ask, *"How does your body feel when you are angry?"*

Step 2. Teach New Skills by Interactive Modeling

- Teach your child positive behaviors. Each time your child has a tantrum, ask yourself what positive behavior you need to teach and practice.
- Respond to your child's upset with modeling in mind. When your child has a tantrum, focus on calming down yourself, and then help your child.
- Raising your voice and your level of upset in response to your child's tantrum will only increase the intensity and duration of your child's upset. Yelling only communicates that you are raising the level of emotional intensity not diminishing it. Leaving your child alone in their room will also escalate the tantrum at this age. They need you because they have literally been overpowered by their own feelings.
- Brainstorm coping strategies. Brainstorming a list, writing it down, and keeping it at the ready can come in handy when your child really needs it. Some ideas include imagining your favorite place, taking a walk, getting a drink of water, taking deep breaths, counting, drawing, or building something.
- The saying "name it to tame it" really works! Look for ways to identify feelings and name them. Post a feelings chart on your refrigerator as a helpful reminder.
- Create a safe base. In a time when your child is not upset, talk about what makes your child feel better and offers comfort. Create a "safe base" with your child -- a place in the house where your child can choose to go when they want comfort. Place a pillow, blanket, and stuffed animal there. Play act using it. *"I am getting red in the face. I'm hot. I feel angry. I'm going to my safe base to calm down."*

- Begin to teach your child to repair harm. Harm could be physical, like breaking something, or emotional, like hurting someone's feelings. Mistakes are a critical aspect of their social learning. We all have our moments when we hurt another, but it's that next step that matters in repairing the relationship. A three-to-four-year-old will not be able to repair harm on their own, but you can help them by checking in with someone they may have harmed and asking if they are OK.

Trap Never command your child to go to their safe base when they are upset. Instead, gently remind, "*Would your safe base help you feel better?*" Offer it as a free choice. If you tell them to go there, it takes away their ownership and your child does not have the opportunity to practice and internalize the self-management skill the experience has the opportunity to build.

Step 3. Practice to Grow Skills and Develop Habits

- Use "Show me..." statements like "*Show me how you can take some deep breaths to calm down.*" This can be used when you observe their upset mounting.
- Recognize effort by using "I notice..." statements like, "*I noticed how you didn't throw your toy when you got frustrated. That's excellent!*"
- Accept feelings (even ones you don't like!): "*Are you mad? Would your doll help you feel better?*" Then, focus on teaching and practicing positive behavior.
- Practice deep breathing. Here are some enjoyable ways to practice together!¹
 - *Blowing Out Birthday Candles Breathing.* You can pretend you are blowing out candles on a birthday cake. Just the image in your head of a birthday cake brings about happy thoughts. And in order to blow out a number of small flames, you have to take in deep breaths.
 - *Teddy Bear Belly Breathing.* Balance a teddy bear on your child's tummy and give it a ride with the rising and falling of their breath. This would be ideal to practice during your bedtime routine when you are lying down and wanting to calm down for the evening.
- Follow through on repairing harm. When your child has caused harm, they need your guidance, encouragement, and support in following through to repair it.
- Include reflections on the day in your bedtime routine: "*What did you like about today?*" or "*What were you most proud of?*" or "*What are you looking forward to tomorrow?*" You should answer the questions as well.

Step 4. **Support** Your Child's Development and Success

- Use intentional communication to foster skill development. For example, *"We are headed to the playground. I know it's tough to leave when you're having fun. Remember I'll give a reminder to do your last fun activity before we go. If you feel upset, we can take some deep breaths together."*
- Learn about your child's development.
- Stay engaged. Working together on ideas for trying out new and different coping strategies can help offer additional support and motivation for your child when tough issues arise.
- Apply logical consequences when needed. Logical consequences should follow soon after the behavior and need to be provided in a way that maintains a healthy relationship.

Step 5. **Recognize** Effort and Quality to Foster Motivation

- Recognize and call out when it is going well: *"I noticed when you got upset, you hugged your bear. That's the way to feel better."*
- Recognize small steps along the way.
- Build celebrations into your routine. For example, after getting through your bedtime routine, snuggle together and read before bed.

References

1. Miller, J.S. (2017). [Teaching young children about anger](#). Thrive Global.

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