

If you would like further help in managing your child's temper tantrums, then speak to your GP or Health Visitor. You can also contact First Steps directly, who are here to help;

For more information, help, and advice, please contact:

**First Steps**  
**Early Intervention & Community Psychology Service**

Hackney Ark  
Downs Park Road  
London E8 2FP  
Tel: 020 7014 7135  
Fax: 020 7014 7251

Further information is also available at:

<http://www.understandingchildhood.net/>  
<http://www.zerotothree.org/>

If you have any issues or concerns please contact:

Patient Advice and Liaison Service  
(PALS): 020 8510 7315/7728

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Clinical Psychologists  
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## How to manage temper tantrums in young children

An information leaflet for parents



*Incorporating hospital and community health services, teaching and research*



There can be many reasons that children have temper tantrums. Based on our knowledge and experience of working with children and families, we try to answer your questions here. If you have any other questions, please talk to a member of our team.

### What are temper tantrums?

Temper tantrums are bursts of behaviour. They include children throwing themselves on the floor, hitting, kicking, screaming, crying, holding their breath, head banging, and vomiting. Children may also say hurtful things to parents during a tantrum (e.g. "I hate you").

Temper tantrums are common in children aged between 18 months and four years. Children are discovering all sorts of things that they can't or mustn't do. They are waging a constant battle with their own passionate wants, hopes and fears. They are easily overwhelmed by strong feelings and don't yet have the words to express themselves.

### What Makes Children have a Temper Tantrum?

Most children have temper tantrums. Some things that can make them more likely are:

- Being tired or unwell.
- Not being able to do what they want to do and not understanding why (e.g. when something is unsafe to play with).
- A delay in development or language, which might interfere with their ability to express themselves.
- Changes in their lives that have upset routines in the family (e.g. parental separation, starting nursery, moving house, a new baby).
- If tantrums got a reaction in the past (e.g. screaming in a supermarket was successful in getting sweets).
- Not getting enough positive attention for good behaviours.

- Confusion caused by different responses between parents or carers, or a parent or carer changing their mind about what the limits are.
- Some children's temperaments can make them more likely to have temper tantrums (e.g. if they are strong willed).

### How to Manage Temper Tantrums?

#### When tantrums happen: Ignore.... and Praise

- Unless they are doing something dangerous or could accidentally hurt themselves, count to 10 before doing anything at all. Take some **deep breaths**.
- **Ignore:** 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. Some people find this easier to do if they say out loud 'When you calm down then we can work this out'.
- ... **and Praise:** As soon as you see any signs of calming down e.g. they pause to draw breath or stop screaming, praise them. Turn your attention back to the child and talk to them with warmth 'Oh you're calming down that's good'.

#### General points for coping

- **Coping** with your child's tantrums doesn't mean trying to stop them being angry – it means coping with how angry they make **you** feel.
- **Remember** that children are usually too emotionally overwrought to listen to reason during a tantrum. It is helpful to let your child and yourself calm down before trying to talk about it.
- **Remember** that children usually don't mean the hurtful things they say during a temper tantrum.

