



American College of Pediatricians

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Patient Information Handout

Childhood Tantrums and Whining

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It is almost a universal truth that your child will have a tantrum sometime after his first birthday. A tantrum is a fit of ill temper (screaming, kicking or bucking) by a child in response to a frustrating situation or displeasing decision. How you, as a parent, handle this behavior will in large part determine whether your child will continue to throw tantrums to get his or her way.

When a tantrum begins, first examine the setting or situation:

- Is my child **sleepy**?
 - A sleepy toddler can be ill-tempered who shows poor self-control. Train your child to be a healthy sleeper. From ages 1 to 3, children need about 10 to 13 hours of sleep a day. Toddlers typically need 2 naps a day until 14-18 months of age, and then one nap a day. Bedtime should ideally be 7-7:30 PM, assuming a wake-up time of about 6AM. Toddlers sleep more deeply if they are not dependent upon a parent to fall asleep. So, put your child down to sleep while he is still awake, at designated times, and in a crib. When trained to fall asleep on their own, toddlers will more consistently sleep through the night and wake well-rested. Talk to your pediatrician if you are having trouble getting your child to sleep. A well-rested child is less likely to have tantrums.
- Is my child **hungry**?
 - Hunger can also cause a toddler to be ill-tempered. Train your child to eat according to his or her needs. Offer healthy snacks at regular intervals (mid-morning and mid-afternoon) and plan to eat meals at designated times. Serve a variety of foods and be a good example to your child.

Next, determine the type of tantrum your child is displaying.

- Is this tantrum due to frustration with a difficult task or protest over your decision or directive?
 - If **frustration**: Help your child with the task, encouraging him to stay calm and self controlled. Example: A toddler trying to open a box, or reach a toy.
 - If **protest**: Ignore the act and look or walk away. Don't reverse your decision. Think about it: Why is your child having the tantrum? Answer: To rebel against your decision, and persuade you to change your mind. It follows then, that the continuation of this behavior requires an audience and occasional success in getting you to change your decision. The cure: Ignore the tantrum and don't give in.

Further Guidance on Dealing with a Protest Temper Tantrum

A protest temper tantrum usually begins when your mostly nonverbal toddler is denied a request or refused a desire. A simple and brief expression of disappointment by your child with your decision is acceptable. However, when this escalates to screaming and thrashing about in protest (a tantrum), it is no longer appropriate.

Keep in mind, your goal is to teach your child self control in all situations, even in disappointing ones. When the expression turns into a tantrum, tell your child (in a short firm statement) that the behavior is inappropriate. If it continues: Don't change your decision (this will only cause her to try this again). Ignore the behavior by looking away or walking away. Don't be an audience to the behavior; this is what she wants.

This same approach can be used for fits of head banging. Some children will slap their head or knock it against the wall or the floor in protest of your decision. Surprisingly, the more you intervene to stop this behavior, the more you encourage your child to repeat it. The discomfort of the act and the loss of your attention to it will cause her to eventually stop. Persistent head-banging should be brought to the attention of your pediatrician.

If the ignored tantrum goes on longer than 1-2 minutes, try the following:

1. Inform your child that you are not going to change your mind and that he must stop “screaming.” It is important to give the tantrum behavior a name, such as screaming, yelling, or a tantrum.
2. If it continues for another couple minutes, take him to his room and put him down on the floor. Tell him that he may not come out until he has stopped “screaming.” Walk away.
3. If he comes out screaming, take him back and give the instruction again. If he comes out a second time, put him back in his room and close the door for about 2 minutes. Now, open the door. If he is quiet or sobbing in remorse, pick him up and go back to the original setting, reminding him that you are not going to change your mind about the matter. If he is protesting even louder, close the door again for 2-3 minutes. Repeat this process until he is remorseful.
4. If, while in the room, your child’s tantrum becomes even louder or he displays aggressive behavior, like hitting the door or throwing things within the room, consequences, such as a spanking or further confinement, will be necessary to gain his attention.

What to do when Your Child Whines

Like tantrums, whining (that high pitched complaining voice) is another immature attempt by a child to convince a parent to change a decision or at least to give more attention to a matter that should be closed. It is usually most effective when the child chooses to whine at an inconvenient moment for the parent to resist, such as when the parent is in a hurry or in a public place. Also like tantrums, the cure is not to reward the action, but to ignore the request until the child can speak in a proper tone. Say, “I don’t hear you when you whine. Let’s try that again.”

Anticipation is the Best Prevention

Anticipate situations where tantrums or whining are likely to occur. Before entering these situations, inform your child (get down on his level and speak eye-to-eye) of your expectations of proper behavior and of the consequences for misbehavior. Remind him of the consequences that occurred last time he misbehaved, or of how proud you were when he behaved properly at other times. Tantrums and whining are most effective for the child when you are rushed. Don’t fall into the trap of giving in for your temporary convenience.

Examples of putting this strategy to work:

Grocery store: Before entering the store, remind your child that he is to stay in the shopping cart, that he is not to beg you to buy various foods/candy, and that if he whines or tantrums, he will be disciplined.

Telephone call: Before you make that lengthy phone call, forewarn your child that she is not to interrupt you (unless it is an emergency). If she has a true need, she can quietly come to your side and wait for an opportunity to make her request. If she disobeys, she will be disciplined.

Visiting friend: Before an invited friend arrives, review the ground rules with your child. “First and best for our guests,” may be a good start. Tell your child that you expect her to share generously. Remind her that if there is whining, the play time will be shortened and further discipline applied, if necessary.

Self Control

Self control is a basic and very important character quality that should be developed in a child at an early age. It is fundamental to acquiring other character qualities such as obedience, respect for authority, honesty, and patience. Teaching a child self control requires that a parent model a steady temperament, praise good behavior, and calmly correct misbehavior. For children with milder temperaments, success can occur earlier and with less effort by the parent. For the more defiant child, more time, energy and creativity will be required to teach proper behavior and correct rebellious behavior. Successfully managing temper tantrums and whining is a great start toward teaching your child self control.