

Tantrum tips

By Stephanie Dunnwind
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Taming tantrums

Prevention

Watch transitions. Heading out to do errands, "parents think, 'Oh, it's only half an hour,' but they're trying to pack 20 things into that," said Redmond parent educator Bridgett Blackburn. All that in-and-out activity can set off some kids.

Avoid tense situations. If Maria Brown's family plans a restaurant outing and her 3-year-old daughter is "in a mood," "I don't even try to sit down," said Brown, a Richmond Beach resident who also has children ages 13 and 14. "I just order food to go." Deborah King, owner of Final Touch Finishing School, agrees the situation must be "appropriate for the age and skill level of the child." "It's unfair to the child and other guests to bring a 2-year-old who is used to eating at McDonald's into a fine-dining establishment."

Make lifestyle changes. "If a child is prone to a lot of tantrums, the first things to look at are sleep and nutrition," said Lynne Reeves Griffin, author of "Negotiation Generation." "A lot of kids go to bed too late and eat food that is not healthy." Other factors: too much screen time and not enough exercise (a positive outlet for energy). Also, look at how much a child is doing each day. "Many kids live a lifestyle that is way too stressed for their age."

Arm yourself. "The only weapon I have is a rather oversized bag that carries most everything I feel may be helpful," notes Kathryn Harrison, a Silverdale mom of two preschoolers. "I always have bubbles, lollipops and crackers, as well as five packets of wipes!"

Set expectations. Give kids an agenda and guidelines. "If you tell kids when you go into a store, 'You're not getting any treats today,' they know where they stand," said Linda McDaniels, associate director of Parent Trust for Washington Children. "But if you've said that before and then got them anyway, they're going to test you."

Don't push it. Sometimes a tantrum comes out of nowhere. But in other cases, parents ignore the buildup (which often starts with whining or crying). "We do it to ourselves when we want to accomplish our agenda," Blackburn said.

In the moment

Stop talking. "The biggest mistake parents make is to keep trying to explain a non-negotiable rule in midrant," Griffin said. "If you're talking about it, then the child assumes it's still on the table."

Stay calm. If your goal is to get through it as quickly as possible, yelling or threatening will likely just escalate (and thus prolong) a tantrum. "If a child is in an overstimulated state, any sensory input you give just makes them go bigger," Griffin said.

Don't give in. Kids who learn tantrums work will keep pushing until parents capitulate. Parents will find tantrums get worse before they get better as kids test parents' resolve.

Don't take it personally. McDaniels likens a tantrum to an overheated, spewing tea kettle. "Kids didn't decide to make your life miserable," she said. "They're just overwhelmed by emotion and have fewer tools to deal with it."

Bribe. Yourself, that is. Mentally promise a latte or ice cream as a reward for keeping your cool, suggests McDaniels.

Work it out later. "You can't problem-solve when they're out of control," McDaniels said. "You can name what they're feeling, but don't try to talk them out of it." Later, when they've calmed down, talk about different ways they could have handled their disappointment/frustration/anger.

For bystanders

Keep that eye-rolling to yourself. Acting rudely "only raises your own blood pressure," says Corinne Gregory, president of The PoliteChild. "Children don't have the impulse control adults do," she said. "I try to lead with an attitude of kindness and give the benefit of the doubt." If parents are oblivious to unruly children, the best solution is just to remove oneself from the situation, rather than hope to change it, she advises.

Be supportive. Parents say one positive comment can help restore their battered parenting esteem after a tantrum. Brown sent a note to The Times' Rant & Rave column after earning angry glares when her preschooler threw a brief tantrum at the Richmond Beach Library. A librarian told her she handled the situation well. "I needed to hear it so badly," Brown said.

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