



*Lucy Daniels*

*Center for Early Childhood*

Helping children live emotionally healthy lives

## **Temper Tantrums**

Although tantrums are all but inevitable — it is a rare child who has never "pitched a fit" — reducing their frequency is the best way to help children.

**What is a temper tantrum?:** Temper tantrums may occur when two conditions are fulfilled. First, a child must be quite angry. It is worthwhile to keep in mind that anger is always a response to some other uncomfortable situation, such as physical pain, anxiety, sadness, loneliness, shame and guilt. The second condition is that the child temporarily loses some emotional competencies, such as the ability to make judgments, tolerate frustrations and control behaviors. Such a temporary loss of mental abilities is called regression. Understanding regression enables parents to better assist a child's development.

**Not all angry outbursts are tantrums:** Sometimes children have outbursts of rage but still retain the ability to control themselves if they make sufficient effort. There is often some regression associated with these rage outbursts, but extent of the regression is less than what occurs during a full-fledged tantrum. It may be challenging to judge the extent of a child's regression and associated temporary loss of emotional capabilities. A parent's own empathic attunement to their child is the most reliable guide in these situations.

**What are the effects of angry outbursts and tantrums?:** Children must learn to take responsibility for their reactions and develop coping skills. Rage outbursts that do not progress to temper tantrums offer opportunities for learning and growth, because in the absence of major regression, children retain the emotional capacity to join with a parent in an effort to reach a better resolution.

Temper tantrums do not offer such opportunities for learning and growth. *Rather, children experiencing tantrums are overwhelmed and helpless in the face of their own feelings.* Tantrums are frightening to children because they are assaulted by confusing feelings and ideas. Children may even lose their images of their parents as helpful figures, and see them as negative, hurtful or dangerous. Since tantrums involve an overwhelming loss of control, they reduce children's confidence in their capacity to be the master of their body and emotions.

Some parents believe that the unpleasantness of a tantrum teaches children lessons about the behavior that precedes the tantrum. But Lucy Daniels Center clinicians do not believe that it works this way. Tantrums erode a child's self-esteem and confidence; they are also powerful negative experiences for parents as well, who feeling helpless to assist their child and troubled by their child's extreme behavior, may resort to unhelpful threats, corporal punishment or disciplinary isolation.

**How can parents prevent temper tantrums?:** Because tantrums are such negative experiences for a child, and because they can have long-lasting effects if they happen too often, we recommend that parents protect their child from having to endure this painful experience, to the extent possible and practical.

After some experience with a few tantrums, parents can usually identify the situations that are likely to provoke their child's tantrums. Parents can also predict the painful emotion that a particular problem or situation will evoke and prepare by either adjusting the situation to minimize their child's experience of the painful emotion or by increasing his or her tools to manage the emotion. It is much more helpful to deal with the troubling emotion that stimulates a child's rage than it is to directly deal with the rage.

Here is an illustration of how parents might anticipate and prepare:

*While being wheeled in a cart in the grocery store, Yolinda, age 2 1/2, noticed and began to demand a certain cereal. Recognizing the vocal signs of whininess, her mother simply said "No." She pushed the cart along, diverting Yolinda's interest by pointing out the pretty colors on items on the shelves. Yolinda's painful disappointment was reduced when she was removed from the situation. The engagement with the pretty*

*colors replaced disappointment with enjoyment and a pleasurable mother-child interaction. Yolanda's mother altered the balance of emotion in a more positive direction and provided external support for emotional capacities that were beginning to regress.*

Parents will have the best opportunity to help their child avoid a tantrum if they intervene at her or his first upsurge of anger and sign of regression. However, some children do not give parents much warning. Jill was such a child.

*Jill, age 3, had repeated and hard-to-anticipate temper tantrums. It seemed as if a switch went off inside of her. Sometimes she would launch into tantrums over the same minor frustrations that she would handle quite well on other occasions. As her parents watched Jill carefully, they noticed several signs that were associated with the tantrums. Jill would whine in a characteristic way, insistently say "please," and become jumpy. Jill's parents began to rapidly respond whenever they observed these signs, which they correctly understood as Jill's effort to hold the growing rage inside of her. Since Jill's efforts to contain her rage signaled her wish to avoid tantrums, her mother would say, "Jill, I can tell that you are getting upset inside. Let's do something else, and we can talk about this in a few minutes when you are feeling calmer." Jill's mother was joining with Jill in a collaborative effort by teaching Jill how to take an "internal time-out," a very useful coping skill for getting through life. Furthermore, Jill's mother was helping Jill to replace the option of attempted and unsuccessful private containment with the much more effective coping skills of verbalization and mutual problem solving.*

It is not possible, even with careful effort, to avoid all tantrums. However, a parent's attempts at protecting their child from the painful and unhelpful experiences of temper tantrums will prove to be in a child's best interests.