



## Taming Tempers

Parents expect temper tantrums from 2-year-olds, but angry outbursts don't necessarily stop after the toddler years. Older kids sometimes have trouble handling anger and frustration, too.

Some kids only lose their cool on occasion. But others seem to have a harder time when things don't go their way. Kids who tend to have strong reactions by nature will need more help from parents to manage their tempers.

Controlling outbursts can be difficult for kids — and helping them learn to do so is a tough job for the parents who love them. Try to be patient and positive, and know that these skills take time to develop and that just about every child can improve with the right coaching.

### A Parent's Role

Managing kids can be a challenge. Some days keeping the peace while keeping your cool seems impossible. But whether you're reacting to an occasional temper flare-up or a pattern of outbursts, managing your own anger when things get heated will make it easier to teach kids to do the same.

To help tame a temper, try to be your child's ally — you're both rooting for your child to triumph over the temper that keeps leading to trouble.

While your own patience may be frayed by angry outbursts, opposition, defiance, arguing, and talking back, it's during these episodes that you need your patience most. Of course you feel angry, but what counts is how you handle that.

Reacting to kids' meltdowns with yelling and outbursts of your own will only teach them to do the same. But keeping your cool and calmly working through a frustrating situation lets you show — and teach — appropriate ways to handle anger and frustration.

Let's say you hear your kids fighting over a toy in the other room. You have ignored it, hoping that they would work it out themselves. But the arguing turns into screaming, and soon you hear doors slamming, the thump of hitting, and crying. You decide to get involved before someone gets really hurt.

By the time you arrive at the scene of the fight, you may be at the end of your own rope. After all, the sound of screaming is upsetting, and you may be frustrated that your kids aren't sharing or trying to get along. (And you know that this toy they're fighting over is going to be lost, broken, or ignored before long anyway!)

So what's the best way for you to react? With your own self-control intact. Teaching by example is your most powerful tool. Speak calmly, clearly, and firmly — not with anger, blame, harsh criticisms, threats, or putdowns. Of course, that's easier said than done. But remember that you're trying to teach your child how to handle anger. If you yell or threaten, you'll model and ingrain the exact kinds of behavior you want to discourage. Your kids will see that you're so angry and unable to control your own temper that you can't help but scream — and that won't help them learn not to scream.

## What You Can Do

Regulating emotions and managing behavior are skills that develop slowly over time during childhood. Just like any other skills, your kids will need to learn and practice them, with your help.

If it's uncharacteristic for your child to have a tantrum, on the rare occasion that it happens all you may need to do is clearly but calmly review the rules. "I know you're upset, but no yelling and no name-calling, please" may be all your child needs to gain composure. Follow up by clearly, calmly, and patiently giving an instruction like "tell me what you're upset about" or "please apologize to your brother for calling him that name." In this way, you're guiding your child back to acceptable behavior and encouraging self-control.

Kids whose temper outbursts are routine may lack the necessary self-control to deal with frustration and anger, and may need more help managing those emotions. These steps may help:

**Help kids put it into words.** If your child is in the midst of an outburst, find out what's wrong. If necessary, use a time-out to get your child to settle down or calmly issue a reminder about house rules and expectations — "There's no yelling or throwing stuff; please stop that right now and cool your jets." Remind your child to talk to you without whining, sulking, or yelling. Once your child calms down, ask what got him or her so upset. You might say, "Use your words to tell me what's wrong and what you're mad about." By doing this you help your child put emotions into words and figure out what, if anything, needs to be done to solve the problem.

**Listen and respond.** Once your child puts the feelings into words, it's up to you to listen and say that you understand. If your child is struggling for words, offer some help: "so that made you angry," "you must have felt frustrated," or "that must have hurt your feelings." Offer to help find an answer if there's a problem to be solved, a conflict to be mended, or if an apology is required. Many times, feeling listened to and understood is all kids need to regain their composure. But while acknowledging your child's feelings, it's important to make it clear that strong emotions aren't an excuse for unacceptable behavior. "I know you're mad, but it's still not OK to hit." Then tell your child some things to try instead.

**Create clear ground rules and stick to them.** Set and maintain clear expectations for what is and what is not acceptable. You can do this without using threats, accusations, or putdowns. Your child will get the message if you make clear, simple statements about what's off limits and explain what you want him or her to do. You might say: "There's no yelling in this house. Use your words to tell me what's upsetting you."

Or try these:

- In this family, we don't hit or push or shove.
- There's no screaming allowed.
- There's no door-slamming in our house.
- There's no name calling.
- We don't do that in this family.
- You may not throw things or break things on purpose.

## Coping Strategies for Kids

Kids who've learned that it's not OK to yell, hit, and throw stuff when they're upset need other strategies for calming down when they're angry. Offer some ideas to help them learn safe ways to get the anger out or to find other activities that can create a better mood.

**Take a break from the situation.** Tell your kids that it's OK to walk away from a conflict to avoid an angry outburst. By moving to another part of the house or the backyard, a child can get some space and work on calming down.

**Find a way to (safely) get the anger out.** There may be no punching walls or even pillows, but you can suggest some good ways for a child to vent. Doing a bunch of jumping jacks, dancing around the bedroom, or going outside and doing cartwheels are all good choices. Or your child can choose to write about or draw a picture of what is so upsetting.

**Learn to shift.** This one is tough for kids — and adults, too. Explain that part of calming down is moving from a really angry mood to a more in-control mood. Instead of thinking of the person or situation that caused the anger, encourage your son or daughter to think of something else to do. Suggest things to think of or do that might bring about a better mood. Your child may feel better after a walk around the block, a bike ride, playing a game, reading a favorite book, digging in the garden, or listening to a favorite song. Try one of these things together so you both experience how doing something different can change the way a person feels.

### **Building a Strong Foundation**

Fortunately, really angry episodes don't happen too often for most kids. Those with temper troubles often have an active, strong-willed style and extra energy that needs to be discharged.

Try these steps during the calm times — they can prevent problems before they start by helping kids learn and practice skills needed to manage the heat of the moment:

**Help them label emotions.** Help kids get in the habit of saying what they're feeling and why — for example, "I'm mad because I have to clean my room while my friends are playing." Using words doesn't get a child out of doing a chore, but having the discussion can calm the situation. You're having a conversation instead of an argument. Praise your child for talking about it instead of slamming the door, for instance.

**See that kids get a lot of physical activity.** Active play can really help kids who have big tempers. Encourage outside play and sports your child likes. Karate, wrestling, and running can be especially good for kids who are trying to get their tempers under control. But any activity that gets the heart pumping can help burn off energy and stress.

**Encourage your child to take control.** Compare a temper to a puppy that hasn't yet learned to behave and that's running around all over the place getting into things. Puppies might not mean to be bad — but they need to be trained so that they can learn that there's no eating shoes, no jumping on people or certain furniture, etc. The point is that your child's temper — like a puppy — needs to be trained to learn when it's OK to play, how to use all that extra energy, and how to follow rules.

**Try to be flexible.** Parenting can be a tiring experience, but try not to be too rigid. Hearing a constant chorus of "no" can be disheartening for kids. Sometimes, of course, "no" is absolutely the only answer — "no, you can't ride your bike without your helmet!" But other times, you might let the kids win one. For instance, if your child wants to keep the wiffle ball game going a little longer, maybe give it 15 more minutes.

As anyone who's been really angry knows, following sensible advice can be tough when emotions run high. Give your kids responsibility for getting under control, but be there to remind them how to do it.

Most kids can learn to get better at handling anger and frustration. But if your child frequently gets into fights and arguments with friends, siblings, and adults, additional help might be needed. Talk with the other adults in your child's life — teachers, school counselors, and coaches might be able to help,

and your child's doctor can recommend a counselor or psychologist.

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Date reviewed: April 2009

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