

TEMPER!

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Tantrums may be a normal part of early childhood development, but they're rarely fun for anyone involved. We sought expert advice on how to handle them.

TEXT JADE TAYLOR COOKE

Tantrums come in various forms, depending on the child's age, their temperament and the consistency in boundaries within your home,' explains parenting coach and occupational therapist Celeste Rushby of *munchkins.me*, a collective of coaches who empower parents to help transform family dynamics for the better. She says that, despite all prospective parents dreading the 'terrible twos', tantrums actually begin at between 10 and 18 months.

'They can be as wild as dropping to the floor, throwing things, and kicking and screaming like a rabies-infested wild animal – or as "subtle" as an eight-year-old storming off silently and slamming a door.'

Wait – a tantrum at eight? That's right... 'Unfortunately, tantrums don't just disappear on their own without proactive parenting,' says Rushby. 'Just because they're considered normal, doesn't mean it's okay to ignore the situation and hope it goes away. Tantrums are an opportunity for teaching character. When they're not dealt with properly, young children don't grow out of them. Instead, the tantrums just change shape. Many of us have seen what tantrums look like in adults – it's not pretty! They may not be screaming on the floor like a banshee anymore, but bad attitude, spitefulness and emotional blackmail are just as ugly.'

TRIGGER WARNING

It's important to understand that tantrums aren't just 'bad behaviour'. They're motivated by real and often overwhelming feelings that your child is experiencing. 'In toddlers, the main trigger for tantrums is frustration,' says Rushby. 'It could be frustration that they can't tell you what they want or how they feel in a way you ▶

understand, or that they can't get their way all the time like they did when they were babies.'

She says that other common triggers include over-tiredness, and mood swings caused by blood-sugar spikes and dips (often from eating sugary snacks, or fruit without a protein to balance it).

MANAGE THAT TANTRUM!

Rushby says the way you address a tantrum would depend on the child's age and level of obedience. However, there are basic principles to follow:

- Remain calm. 'If a parent becomes angry or shouts, the child's attention will shift off what they did wrong, and focus solely on how nasty their parent is being. They may feel that they are not loved when they don't listen – and love should be unconditional!'
- Model a good attitude. 'If you are snappy, sarcastic or spiteful ("Fine, if you don't want to listen, then I'll play with your brother instead"), or you roll your eyes or use emotional blackmail ("It breaks Mommy's heart when you shout at me like that"), you are teaching your children to act in the same immature way. Remember, a good attitude is caught more than it is taught.'
- Don't offer physical affection. 'This is a common trend, but the message it sends to the child is, "When I throw a tantrum, mommy stops what she is doing and gives me her undivided attention and cuddles. Best repeat this often!" Clearly not a good idea.'
- Tailor their time-outs. 'Make sure that the length is appropriate for their age (for example, two-year-olds get two minutes). Also make sure that after each of these time intervals, you give the child an opportunity to change their attitude and follow the instruction that was given prior to the tantrum. For example, "Okay, now I need you to pack away your

blocks". If the child is not ready to change their attitude and then listen to the instruction, the time-out is repeated.'

- Be consistent in public and in private. 'Boundaries should not waver depending on the setting or the company you are in. However, you have to first establish boundaries at home before you can expect your child to be able to manage their behaviour and express their thoughts and feelings appropriately in public.' ■



Identifying emotions

'Another important empowerment tool for your child is to teach them about emotions. This becomes incredibly important from three years old,' says Rushby. Here's how she suggests you do it:

1 'Create an "emotions chart" with pictures of scenarios that help them understand what each emotion is about. Include a wide range, like frustration, jealousy, sadness, happiness, disappointment, anger, exhaustion, anxiety and so on.'

2 'When you see emotions flaring up that haven't turned into a tantrum yet, quickly scoop up your child and take them to the emotions chart. Ask them to show you what they are feeling. Name the emotion they are pointing to and ask if they'd like to tell you more about it.'

3 'Do not try to fix the situation to take away their feelings. Do not tell them they don't need to feel that way either. Instead, just let them feel understood and heard, offer comfort and then move on.'

4 'If your child has a tantrum (an inappropriate expression of emotions), deal with the behaviour first. They are not in a teaching space when they are behaving that way. Then, when all is calm again (perhaps half an hour after the behaviour has been resolved), take them to the emotions chart and ask them to show you what they were feeling in that scenario. Let them know that you can understand why they felt that way, and would love to be able to understand their feelings better next time. Discuss how they could better express their feelings next time so that you can be there for them and help them.'