

A guide to handling toddler tantrums

This fun but sometimes trying stage, also known as the 'terrible twos', begins as early as a year old and lasts until a child's almost four. With many children in this age range at our nurseries, we're used to helping children (and their parents or guardians) get through this stage successfully.

To help you understand and cope with toddler tantrums, we've created this guide to explain why tantrums happen and give you some strategies to deal with or prevent them from happening.

Why do toddlers have tantrums?

Your toddler is now an active explorer. They're asking more questions, investigating more objects and learning to talk. They're becoming more sociable and are starting to have a greater understanding of the world.

This is the time that they become more independent, but can't quite manage on their own yet. Your toddler thinks they should be able to complete a task on their own, but sometimes can't, either because of their own limitations or restrictions set by caring adults around them (no using the kitchen stove just yet!).

But, since they don't quite have the language skills to fully communicate their needs and desires, they communicate in other ways — like throwing a tantrum.

What can I do when my child is throwing a tantrum?

Do your best to remain calm. Be patient and sensitive in your response. Do not battle. Try not to (even inadvertently) reinforce the behaviour by yelling, laughing or providing some other response. Instead, try to ignore the tantrum, refrain from eye contact and wait for your child to calm down (they will eventually, we promise!).

If you're in a public space, try not to get too embarrassed. Chances are, there are lots of other parents around who sympathise with you. Or, you can try to pick your child up and go somewhere more private, like the car.

Sometimes, narrating how your toddler is feeling can help as it gives them the words they may be lacking. Otherwise, try positive distraction tactics. If you're at the store, try to say 'I know you're upset because you wanted the toy. Why don't you help me get the other items we need from the shelves instead? Can you help me find them?'

When your child settles down, use a relaxed, calm tone of voice to reassure them and remind them how much you love them.

How can I prevent tantrums from happening?

Though you may not be able to prevent a tantrum all the time, there are some steps you can take to reduce how often they happen.

- After a few of your child's 'moments', you'll start to notice a pattern in their pre-tantrum behaviour. Once you know the triggers, like boredom, tiredness, hunger or simply feeling overwhelmed, you can start to avoid them and situations that cause them.
- Feed their need for independence. Give them tasks to do, like finding things in a shop or setting the table. Active play can also help as part of a balanced routine that includes naps and mealtimes. This will help you child feel secure, less overwhelmed and too tired to tantrum.
- Give them choice. Now they're independent, it's likely that they'll want to make their own choices. When asking them to choose, give clear instructions, such as two straight-forward options (would you rather wear your pink sandals or your white trainers?). Also set clear expectations. For example, if you're going to the store to buy a birthday present for someone else, remind your toddler that they won't be getting anything for themselves this time.
- Support their language development. At around two, a toddler will say about 200 -250 words, but their understanding will be a lot greater than this. Singing songs, naming objects and reading stories will all support your child's language development and help them communicate better when they get frustrated.

Of course, sometimes even your best intentions can't prevent a tantrum. Try to take a deep breath, stay calm and try again next time.

What we do to help at Little Pioneers

We give our children free access between the inside and the outdoors, lots of chances to make choices and their own sets of tasks to complete. This means that they're always encouraged to be as independent as possible.

We run lots of activities (including stories and role playing) that help them to understand their feelings, how to deal with them and how their actions can affect others. We also set behaviour expectations through our golden values, which our children are reminded of every day.

Even when a tantrum does occur, we have a behaviour policy that's used across all of our nurseries. This means that no matter what room or nursery your child is in, they'll have the same support, which involves redirecting their attention or waiting it out without reinforcing their behaviour. Our nurseries are also working towards 'Investing in Children' accreditations, meaning that all of the children are listened to and involved in decisions, both about the nursery and during the day.

What's on the other side of toddler tantrums?

Both you and your child will get through this stage of development when your child is able to communicate their needs more clearly (it will happen, trust us!). And you'll have a much more independent, confident child as a result.