

# A parent's guide to ... tantrums in older children

Penny Tassoni, early years consultant and author, 11 February 2010, 12:00am

**Tantrums in two-year-olds are not exactly fun for parents, but spare a thought for those parents whose four and five-year-olds regularly attack the floor and even them.**



Unlike the tantrums of a two-year-old that are usually short-lived affairs, an older child's tantrum is long lasting, louder and extraordinarily difficult to ignore. Long gone is the possibility of simply tucking the child under an arm and taking refuge in a discreet place. So what causes some children to have tantrums at an older age and what are a parent's options?

First, let's start with some basic principles. Few children enjoy having a tantrum. It is not something that gives them great pleasure and to my knowledge, few children plan their tantrums a day in advance. Tantrums can ruin a birthday party, destroy a day out and, if left unchecked, destabilise relationships in a family. In short, there are no winners. This means that for everybody's sakes, thought has to be given as to why your child has fallen into the pattern of this behaviour. The answer is often quite complex and will vary from family to family and even from child to child.

## **SLEEP**

A great starting point is sleep, as it is the easiest one to rectify. Sleep deprived children (including teenagers) are likely to have emotional outbursts. While they may be getting enough sleep to 'function', it might not be sufficient to control their emotions and impulses, especially if they are at full-time nursery or school. Many four and five-year-olds need 12 hours of unbroken sleep, and a previous generation of childcare experts put a further hour's nap on to this!

Begin by keeping a diary of exactly how much sleep, not just time in bed, your child is really getting over a week. Then, if needed, bring bedtime forward a few minutes each night.

## **LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT**

If you are confident that sleep is not the problem, think now about your child's language development. How fluent are they? How well can they use their talk to answer back, to negotiate or to understand the meaning of your explanations? Frustration plays a huge part in tantrums and so, if your child is not yet using speech fluently, consider getting a referral for speech and language therapy. Allied to this is also how well your child is hearing. Some children have periods in which they develop 'glue ear' and this means that they cannot always hear clearly. Glue ear's temporary nature can make it hard to spot, but the good news is that once identified, it can be treated.

## **PARENTING**

Consider next, without beating yourself up, how things have played out within your parenting style. Have you allowed your child to rule you, or have circumstances changed? Parents can sometimes look back and see that things really began to take a turn for the worse six months or so after the birth of a sibling, the breakdown of their relationship, the introduction of a new partner, or just a bad run of luck.

At the time, some children do not show much reaction or seem adapted, but still waters can run deep. Some children need strong boundaries in order to cope with their feelings. In 'dodgy' times, it is common for parents to lose their usual parenting plot because they are feeling guilty, working too hard or just trying to hold things together. Attention is sometimes scarce, calm ways of parenting are forgotten and the path of least resistance is chosen.

## **A NEW JOURNEY**

Put any guilt aside and imagine that you and your child are now starting out a new journey. Changing habits of behaviour take time and also energy. (In some cases, it also requires professional help, so do not be embarrassed to seek it, if you feel you cannot cope alone.) Your aim is to reduce week by week the number of tantrums and situations in which they occur.

Be ready to be pro-active, positive and consistent. Steady attention, love and praise are required alongside being ready to handle outbursts calmly but without giving in or becoming angry. This often means ignoring a tantrum or quietly restating the boundary. No, it's not fun, and yes, your instinct maybe to shout, but if you can find the inner strength to stay calm, your child will regain emotional security because now their world (you) is a more certain one.

## **DO'S AND DON'TS**

### **DO ...**

- check that your child is getting sufficient sleep and exercise
- try to work out if there is a pattern to tantrums - for example, on school days
- think about how much positive attention and praise you give your child
- consider whether sibling rivalry is an underlying issue
- work out the boundaries that are important for your family
- give your child clear instructions and say when they are not negotiable.

**DON'T ...**

- be embarrassed to get professional help and advice
- fall into the trap of saying 'no' and then negotiating it away
- panic if your child has the odd 'one-off' tantrum; this is normal
- feel guilty about saying 'no' to your child occasionally - learning that you cannot always have or do what you want is part of growing up.