

Tantrums Age 3 Summary

Why Tantrums?

Your three-year-old may scream and cry when you say “No” to a request for a special snack, or they might cry hysterically and refuse to leave the house, making you late for a commitment. Learning how to deal with your child’s anger, upset, and many other accompanying feelings can become challenging if you don’t have plans and strategies to manage them.

STEP 1	 GET INPUT	Get Your Child Thinking by Getting Their Input
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Before you can get input from your child to understand (and help them understand) what they are feeling, you both need to be calm. Your child will not learn from the situation if you or they are upset.

- Ask yourself if your child is hungry or tired. You could offer a snack or transition to a nap.
- Check on how you are feeling. If you are angry, frustrated, or overwhelmed, take a “parenting time out” and take several deep breaths (it really does help) or sit quietly for a few minutes.
- If your child's basic needs, such as hunger or tiredness, are not an issue, take additional steps to help them calm down. This might involve offering a hug, helping them take deep breaths, or holding a blanket or stuffed animal.

Three-to-four-year-olds are learning to understand their feelings. They are also beginning to understand other people’s feelings and how their actions affect others. They will need your support to figure this out. When both you and your child are calm, reflect on your child’s feelings so you can be prepared to help. Ask yourself:

- “Does my child have an unmet need?” They might need someone to listen or give them attention, some alone time, or some help so they can be successful at something they are trying to do.
- You can ask them about how they are feeling.
 - *“I noticed your face got red, and your forehead got all scrunched up. So, when you threw the toy, were you feeling frustrated?”*
 - *“I saw you dropped your popsicle on the ground. I wonder if you are feeling sad?”*
 - If they seem to be stalling by asking for another drink or a snack at bedtime, you could ask, *“Are you feeling scared?”*
- You can also ask them about how they think others might be feeling.
 - *“Your sister cried when you took the toy. What do you think she is feeling?”*
 - *“When your friend didn’t get to take their turn, how do you think they were feeling?”*

- *“When you said that to me, how do you think that made me feel?”*
- If your child has recently thrown a tantrum, then use that example to reflect on what caused it at a time when you are both calm. You might ask, *“What upset you at the grocery store?”* Finding out what contributed to a tantrum can give you insight into your child’s triggers and also help raise your child’s self-awareness.

STEP
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Teach New Skills

- Teach your child positive behaviors. Each time your child has a tantrum, ask yourself what positive behavior you need to teach and practice.
- Respond to your child’s upset with modeling in mind. When your child has a tantrum, focus on calming down yourself, and then help your child. Stop what you are doing and walk them to a safe, non-public spot where they can calm down. Don’t leave them. Be with them and use a calm, soft voice. Encourage them to breathe by breathing slowly with them. Don’t try to talk about the situation until they are calm (they won’t be able to hear you anyway). Stand aside and focus on your deep breathing while you allow your child time to calm down.
- Raising your voice and your level of upset in response to your child’s tantrum will only increase the intensity and duration of your child’s upset. Yelling only communicates that you are raising the emotional intensity, not diminishing it. Your yelling may also scare your child and negatively impact your relationship. Leaving your child alone in their room will also escalate the tantrum at this age. They need you because their feelings have overpowered them.
- You can expand your child’s emotional vocabulary by labeling and narrating your feelings throughout the day. Remember to label both positive and negative feelings. For example, you may say, *“I am feeling really calm now that the kitchen is cleaned up. When there are many chores, I have trouble relaxing.”* Sharing your experience will help develop empathy and invite your child’s curiosity about their experience.
- Additionally, talk through your regulation strategies as you go through the day. This may look like, *“I feel stressed, and my belly hurts slightly. I know fresh air and a walk are helpful when I feel this way. I’d like to move my body and go to the park.”* Modeling through actions is even more helpful than teaching specific skills to your child.
- Create a safe base. In a time when your child is not upset, talk about what makes your child feel calmer and offers comfort. Create a “safe base” with your child -- a place in the house where your child can choose to go when they want comfort. Place a pillow, blanket, and stuffed animal there. Play act using it. *“I am getting red in the face. I’m hot. I feel angry. I’m going to my safe base to calm down.”*
- Begin to teach your child to repair harm. A critical step in teaching children about managing anger is how to repair harm when they’ve caused it. Harm could be physical, like breaking something, or emotional, like hurting someone’s feelings. Mistakes are a critical aspect of their social learning. We all have moments when we hurt another, but that next step matters in repairing the relationship. A three-to-four-year-old cannot repair harm independently, but you can help them by checking in with someone they may have harmed and asking if they are OK.

Trap: Never command your child to go to their safe base when they are upset. Instead, gently remind, *“Would your safe base help you feel better?”* Offer it as a free choice. If you tell them to go there, it takes away their ownership, and your child does not have the opportunity to practice and internalize the self-management skills the experience has the chance to build.

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Practice to Grow Skills and Develop Habits

- Use “Show me...” statements with a positive tone and body language to express excitement and curiosity. When a child learns a new ability, they are eager to show it off! Give them that chance. Say, *“Show me how you can take deep breaths to calm down.”* This can be used when you observe their upset mounting.
- Recognize effort using “I notice...” statements like, *“I noticed how you didn’t throw your toy when you got frustrated. That’s excellent!”*
- Accept feelings. If you will help your child manage their biggest feelings, it is essential to acknowledge and accept their feelings - even ones you don’t like. When your child is upset, consider your response. Instead of focusing on their actions or the problem, focus on their feelings FIRST. You could say, *“Are you mad? Would your doll help you feel better?”* Then, focus on teaching and practicing positive behavior.
- Practice deep breathing. Because deep breathing is a simple way to assist your child anytime, anywhere, it’s important to get in plenty of practice to make it easy to use when needed.
- Follow through on repairing harm. When your child has caused harm, they need your guidance, encouragement, and support to repair it. They may need to hold your hand through that process, and that’s okay! They are learning the invaluable skill of responsible decision-making.

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Support Your Child’s Development and Success

- Use intentional communication to foster skill development. For example, *“We are headed to the playground. I know it’s tough to leave when you’re having fun. Remember, I’ll remind you to do your last fun activity before we go. If you feel upset, we can take some deep breaths together.”*
- Learn about your child’s development. Each new age presents different challenges, and being informed about your child’s developmental milestones promotes empathy and patience.
- Stay engaged. Working together on ideas for trying out new and different coping strategies can help offer additional support and motivation for your child when challenging issues arise.

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Recognize Efforts

- Recognize and call out when things are going well. It may seem obvious, but it's easy not to notice when everything moves smoothly. Noticing and naming the behavior provides the necessary reinforcement that you see and value your child's choice.
- Recognize small steps along the way. Don't wait for significant accomplishments—like the full bedtime routine going smoothly—to recognize effort. Remember that your recognition can work as a tool to promote more positive behaviors. Find small ways your child is making an effort and let them know you see them.
- Build celebrations into your routine. For example, after completing your bedtime routine, snuggle and read before bed.

Trap: It can be easy to resort to bribes when recognition and occasional rewards are underutilized. If parents or those in a parenting role frequently resort to bribes, it is likely time to revisit the five-step process.

Trap: Think about what behavior a bribe may unintentionally reinforce. For example, offering a sucker if a child stops a tantrum in the grocery store checkout line may teach the child that future tantrums lead to additional treats.

Recommended Citation: Center for Health and Safety Culture. (2024). *Tantrums Age 3 Summary*. Retrieved from <https://www.ToolsforYourChildsSuccess.org>

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