

CERTIFIED CHILDREN'S HEALTH COUNSELOR ONLINE COURSE SESSION 7:

Dealing with Temper Tantrums, Causes and Tools

The Difference between Tantrums and Sensory Meltdowns

- Tantrums and sensory meltdowns are not the same thing.
- It can be hard to tell the difference between them by just looking at an upset child.
- Knowing the causes of tantrums and meltdowns can help you learn how to manage them.



Many people think the words “tantrum” and “meltdown” mean the same thing. And they can look very similar when you see a child in the middle of having one. But for kids who have sensory processing issues or who lack self-control, a meltdown is very different from a tantrum. Knowing the differences can help you learn how to respond in a way that better supports your child.

What is a Tantrum?

A tantrum is an outburst that happens when a child is trying to get something he wants or needs. Some kids with learning and attention issues are more prone to tantrums. For instance, some can be impulsive and have trouble keeping their emotions in check. They may get angry or frustrated quickly.

A child may have a tantrum if he didn't get to go first in a game of kickball. Or he might get upset when you pay attention to his sister and he wants your attention. Yelling, crying or lashing out isn't an appropriate way for him to express his feelings, but he's doing it for a reason. And he has some control over his behavior.

Your child may even stop in the middle of a tantrum to make sure you're looking at him. When he sees that you're watching him, he may pick up where he left off. His tantrum is likely to stop when he gets what he wants—or when he realizes he *won't* get what he wants by acting out.

What a Sensory Meltdown Is

A meltdown is a reaction to feeling overwhelmed.

For some kids, it happens when there's too much sensory information to process. The commotion of an amusement park might set them off, for instance. For other kids, it can be a reaction to having too many things to think about. A back-to-school shopping trip could cause a tantrum that triggers a meltdown.

Here's one way to think about too much sensory input. Imagine filling a small water pitcher. Most of the time, you can control the flow of water and fill the pitcher a little at a time. But sometimes the water flow is too strong and the pitcher overflows before you can turn the water off.

That's how a sensory meltdown works. The noise at the amusement park or the stack of clothes to try on in the dressing room at the mall is sensory input that floods your child's brain. Once that happens, some experts think your child's fight-or-flight response kicks in. That excess input overflows in the form of yelling, crying, lashing out or running away.

Different Strategies for Tantrums and Meltdowns

The causes of tantrums and meltdowns are different, and so are the strategies that can help stop them. It's important to remember that the key difference between the two types of outbursts is that tantrums usually have a purpose. Kids are looking for a certain response. Meltdowns are a reaction to something and are usually beyond a child's control.

A child can often stop a tantrum if he gets what he wants. Or if he's rewarded for using a more appropriate behavior. But a meltdown isn't likely to stop when a child gets what he wants. In fact, he may not even know what he wants.

Meltdowns tend to end in one of two ways. One is fatigue—kids wear themselves out. The other way a change in the amount of sensory input. This can help kids feel less overwhelmed. For example, your child may start to feel calmer when you step outside the store and leave the mall.

So how can you handle tantrums and meltdowns differently?

- **To tame tantrums, acknowledge what your child needs without giving in.** Make it clear that you understand what he's after. "I see that you want my attention. When your sister is done talking, it'll be your turn." Then help him see there's a more appropriate behavior that will work. "When you're done yelling, tell me calmly that you're ready for my time."
- **To manage a meltdown, help your child find a safe, quiet place to de-escalate.** "Let's leave the mall and sit in the car for a few minutes." Then provide a calm, reassuring presence without talking too much to your child. The goal is to reduce the input coming at him.

Knowing the difference between tantrums and meltdowns is the key to helping your child through them. It may also help to get a better idea of the kinds of situations that can be challenging for your child. You can also explore tips on how to deal with noise and other sensitivities.

10 Ways to Stop a Tantrum

It happens to every parent at some point. We're standing in line at the grocery store and our little one starts to fuss and cry because they've just been told no candy before dinner. A little whining transforms itself into a full blown tantrum, and now Mom (or Dad!) is frantically trying to get through the checkout line with a smile on her face while attempting to appease and calm her little angel. Sound familiar? Even the most easy-going, well-behaved child can have a tough time every now and then. When attempting to tackle the meltdowns and hoping to make them less frequent, having a few tricks up your sleeve can make all the difference. Here are a few common approaches to try when this happens to you. You might try imagining how each would work with your particular child in different situations before it happens, so you are not quick-cycling between approaches in the midst of the turmoil.

Ignore the Tantrum

Ignoring it may not always work, but it's worth giving it a try in certain situations. Some things simply must happen, even if your child is having a meltdown. Groceries must be purchased, car seats must be buckled, bodies must be cleaned (at least sometimes). Even while you might understand and feel sympathy for your struggling child, you still might need to ignore the tantrum and push through your agenda. In the grocery store, it can get you through the last minutes of the checkout line; at home, you might even walk away to take a deep breath and evaluate what is really happening. A minute alone can also give an overwhelmed child a little time to work through his or her feelings.

Offer a Distraction

Sometimes, a parent or caregiver veering wildly away from the source of the tantrum can catch a child before they have completely melted down. Get them to focus their attention on something new; sing them a song or offer a more acceptable choice than what they're crying for. Offering utterly silly or impossible alternatives might tickle their funny bone. Diverting their attention can make them lose sight of what triggered the tantrum to begin with.

Find the Cause

There are often valid, underlying reasons for a tantrum. Watch for a pattern, perhaps being hungry, thirsty, or tired is the culprit. There are also developmental points when the world is just more frustrating for children. Knowing when you are asking more of a child than they might be able to give should also help you avoid tantrums. Be prepared with extra snacks; offering food before a tantrum starts is often your best bet. If your child is three or younger, maybe carry them on your back where they can be sheltered and non-interactive, even if you cannot get them down for a nap. Respecting both your needs and your child's means you can more easily find compromise solutions for avoiding tantrums.

Know the Triggers

Knowing your child's triggers may help prevent the next tantrum. There may be certain situations that lead to this behavior. You might offer an incentive to help a child struggling with their bedtime ritual, like an extra bedtime story. A special treat, like a favorite book or good car toy or a lollipop, might help get the reluctant child from the door into the carseat. Some children respond well to less talking during transitions; you might prepare yourself with a few songs so you are too busy singing to get involved in lots of chatter. As adults, we also steadily, though solicitously, pepper children with questions; some tantrums can be avoided by replacing questions (Do you want cereal?) with clear statements (You may have cereal.)

Practice Patience

It's very easy to lose your cool when there's a screaming child in front of you, but keeping calm and showing patience is the best way to reinforce the behaviors that you want from your child. Some of a tantrum can be a child's own sense of being overwhelmed by the strength of their emotions. When the adult also gets bowled over, it can escalate the tantrum. Growing up is hard work, and if we, as parents, can see tantrums as the bright orange flags of "construction", we can take the deep breath we'll need to make it through this detour.

Stand your Ground

Don't give in to tantrums, even when you're out in public. It is better to abandon ship than to try to "treat" the tantrum away. Because tantrums are so often about an underlying cause, you may only be encouraging "bad" behavior without addressing the real issue. However, try to remain sympathetic; your child is not doing this TO you.

Give them a Job

Another diversionary tactic, yes, but it can give the child a sense of power and control. It can also focus their attention outside of themselves and their discomfort. Maybe they could help you locate an item or greet everyone you pass in the store. Maybe they would just be happy to choose which bananas or to carry something for you. Feeling useful instead of endlessly dragged around can do a lot for almost anyone's morale.

Be a Clown

Let's not take ourselves too seriously. It's okay to be silly with your kids; it can get their attention quickly and put a smile on their faces, discouraging that outburst.

Set the Example

Be the role model you want to see in your children. Kids learn what they see and model behaviors from their parents. It isn't always easy but approaching these situations with calm and patience shows children acceptable behaviors to copy.

Pay Attention

Outbursts cannot always be avoided, but if we watch for warning signs, we can sometimes turn the course. A well-timed cuddle, snack or exit might bring peace to your whole day.

It can be difficult to keep one's cool during these circumstances, especially if the tantrum occurs in front of others. Preparing a strategy ahead of time may help defuse and even prevent some temper tantrums no matter where you are. However, we all know parenting is not an exact science; we learn as we go, building from prior experiences, striving to do better for our kids each time. So when the unavoidable happens, just remember, take a deep breath and remember, tomorrow's another day.

**CERTIFIED CHILDREN'S HEALTH COUNSELOR ONLINE COURSE - SESSION 7
QUESTION & ANSWERS**

NAME: _____

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Please be sure to fill out the information above, complete the test and e-mail or mail it back to us at iridology@netzero.net or P.O. Box 485, Weimar, CA, 95736-0485. We will grade your question & answer session and will let you know if we have any questions or concerns. **Please use a separate sheet to do this assignment.**

All information will be kept private. If you would like comments and suggestions let us know and we will respond to you.

True or False:

- Tantrums happen when a child is trying to get something he wants or needs.

- Meltdowns occur when a child feels overwhelmed by his feelings or surroundings.
- Knowing the difference between tantrums and meltdowns can help you manage these outbursts.