



I see a bad mood rising

Unfortunately people don't grow out of temper tantrums the way they do shoes or car seats. Here's how to defuse a fit of rage, whether the person throwing it is 5 or 45.

WRITTEN BY Elizabeth Passarella ILLUSTRATIONS BY Luke Pearson



If you have a child, you have at some point peeled his red-faced self off the floor of the baking aisle because you told him no, you're not buying sprinkles for dinner. (Was he still wearing pants when you exited the store? Congratulations.) "Tantrums are common from ages one to four because kids become frustrated when they can't get what they want," says Robert G. Harrington, a professor of psychology at the University of Kansas who specializes in child development, behavior management, and parent education. "Younger kids may also lack the language skills to voice that frustration." Since a two-year-old doesn't know how to tell you exactly where to stick that gummy worm you aren't handing over, he loses it.

As we mature, we get (somewhat) better at articulating our needs and exercising self-control. But people of all ages still boil over—because our team lost the soccer game or we just want the %*#@! DVR to work after a long day. And believe it or not, the tactics that calm a screaming toddler can apply to everybody. Here's the classic three-point plan for managing a meltdown, followed by specific strategies for every age.



happy place

For kid-friendly ways to head off a meltdown (they'll work for you, too), go to realsimple.com/kidstress.

1. ANTICIPATE. We all have temper triggers. For a toddler, it may be getting dressed for preschool; for an adult, it may be talking about the credit-card bill after three glasses of wine. If you're aware of the triggers, you may be able to avoid the tantrum. (Allow time for multiple Croc changes; put off the budget meeting until morning.) Also, remember the acronym HALT: Tantrums often happen because the thrower is *hungry, agitated, lonely, or tired*, says Harrington.

2. WAIT. When someone is having a tantrum, don't throw a tantrum yourself. It will only add fuel to the fire. "Don't yell back in the middle of the outburst," says Harrington. "Offer choices, get out of the situation, or just take a breath. Often it will pass."

3. VALIDATE. One reason people throw tantrums is that they want to be heard, says Susan Orenstein, a psychologist in Cary, North Carolina, who focuses on marriage and relationships. "They grow louder and more animated as a way to get attention and show you that this issue is important to them." So let the tantrum thrower know you feel his pain. This doesn't mean you have to agree. A simple "I understand you're angry" will suffice. With kids, it's also important to let them know that it's OK to express emotion, but in an appropriate way. You might say to a toddler, "I understand that you're frustrated that you can't get the refrigerator open," and then explain a better way to react: "If you would ask me to please help you, I'd love to."

the post-toddler years

So, hallelujah, tantrums disappear on your child's fourth birthday, right? Well, not necessarily—as you know if you've ever unplugged a Wii in the middle of an eight-year-old's game. (Of course, if tantrums are happening a few times a day, or if your child is biting and hitting or can't calm himself down within 15 minutes, you may be dealing with a more serious issue, like attention deficit hyperactivity disorder [ADHD] or Asperger's syndrome. Consider seeing a pediatrician or a mental-health professional.)

WHY IS THIS HAPPENING? Well, because you unplugged the Wii when he had his highest table-tennis score ever, Mom. Kids this age are still learning coping and communication skills. Also, if you've established a pattern of yelling at your child until he does what you want, he may have learned that screaming is the best way to get compliance. (Ouch.)

IN THE HEAT OF THE MOMENT: "People describe their kids as going from 0 to 60 in three seconds, but that's not necessarily so," says Harrington. "You probably know the warning signs: Maybe he starts tapping his fork on the dinner table. As soon as that happens, look him in the eyes and say, 'I can see that you're frustrated. What are you thinking? How are you feeling?'" He may say, "I feel like I hate you," and then the challenge is to stay calm. No matter how hurtful or irritating your child is being, he needs your unconditional love, since outbursts are often about wanting to be cared for and affirmed, says Harrington. You can





discipline or problem-solve later. Right now, say, “I love you no matter what you say, and you’re not a bad kid. But we need to take a break and then talk about this.”

HOW TO HANDLE THE AFTERMATH: Make a plan. When the dust has settled, set up rules for times when tantrums are most common. “Don’t be an ‘ish’ person—bedtime is 8 P.M.-ish, guidelines about the computer change every day,” says Harrington. Your rules should include consequences for what will happen if your child doesn’t follow through. Give her a warning (for example, set a timer that lets her know she has five minutes to get ready for bed), and reinforce the idea that her behavior is a choice: “OK, you are choosing no TV for the next two nights because you aren’t following the plan we set.” And don’t get stuck thinking life will always be a battle. “Kids change quickly,” says Jeffrey Bernstein, a psychologist in Exton, Pennsylvania, and the author of *10 Days to a Less Defiant Child*. “You may be in a very different place in just three to six months.”

teenagers

At this age, tantrum throwers may not just scream and cry but also skulk into a dark bedroom, muttering, “You’re ruining my life.”

WHY IS THIS HAPPENING? Teenage brains are still under construction: The prefrontal cortex, which is in charge of impulse control, problem solving, and determining appropriate social behavior, doesn’t fully mature until around age 25. Like toddlers, teenagers long for control and independence, but they might not be equipped to deal with the consequences. They may also be savvy enough by now to use tantrums to manipulate you. (*Mom won’t let me stay out late? Watch me throw a fit.*)

IN THE HEAT OF THE MOMENT: If she runs into her room and slams the door, leave her there. What a teenager needs most mid-tantrum is time to calm down. She also needs sympathy and wants to know that



you’re on her side. Show her that you’re not the enemy, advises Bernstein, by saying, “I hear you. I’m here to help you. But I’m asking if you could please not use that tone.” That *please* is important, he says: “Pleases and *thank-yous* build a lot of goodwill. Many parents leave those out.” Finally, see if you can get her to talk about what’s really going on. That childish anger may stem from a more complicated emotion—say, social embarrassment because she’ll be the *only* kid whose parents won’t let her drive to school.

HOW TO HANDLE THE AFTERMATH: Since your child wants control and respect, offer some of both by letting her suggest solutions. “Sit down and have a ‘business meeting,’” says Joel Dillon, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist in practice with Susan Orenstein. “No TV, no phones, no distract-

tion. Point out areas in which she’s doing well, discuss where she needs improvement, then let her share her goals or struggles.” Talk about a strategy. You might even consider putting it in writing. “Contracts are great for teens,” says Harrington, because they make expectations clear. “This is what I agreed to, and this is what I get.” An example: John sets an alarm to wake up and get his younger brother to school without any kidney punching, and he can stay out an extra hour on Saturday night. As with younger kids, there should be clear consequences for breaking the deal and rewards for improvement.



adults

Anyone who has lashed out at a spouse at the end of a long day knows that grown-ups throw tantrums. We call them disagreements. Or justified outrage, because he loaded the dishwasher wrong. *Again.*

WHY IS THIS HAPPENING? Sheer frustration, of course. And remember HALT—hungry, agitated, lonely, tired? You probably know all about the tired part; sleep-deprived lab rats are also more prone to aggression. And there is evidence that certain people are wired to fly off the handle more easily. “Some of us have a harder time putting on the

brakes,” says Orenstein. In one 2009 study from the University of Bonn, in Germany, researchers found that subjects prone to fits of anger had less gray matter in the amygdala, the part of the brain that regulates emotion.

IN THE HEAT OF THE MOMENT: If your spouse is throwing a tantrum, try saying something like “Honey, I know you’re upset. I am listening to you. But can we take a break and figure this out in a little while?” And be willing to wait. It can take 20 minutes to an hour for surging stress hormones to subside completely. Forcing a serious conversation immediately sets you up for failure.

If you are a tantrum thrower, this advice may enrage you, but yes, you should take a deep breath and count to 10. Deep breathing activates the body’s parasymp-

thetic nervous system, which is essential for relaxation. “I always say to people, ‘If you really want to yell at him, you can do it later,’” says Orenstein. Chances are you won’t, but the bottom line is: Midtantrum is not your most persuasive, lovable self. You’ll make your point more effectively when you’re not hurling the remote.

HOW TO HANDLE THE AFTERMATH: To your tantrum-throwing spouse, instead of hurling accusations (“Stop acting like a crazy person!”), acknowledge what’s bothering him and let him know what you need to stick with him through the storm. For example: “I know you’re mad when I am running late and don’t call, but when you start slinging dinner plates, it’s hard for me to hear you out.” If you’re the one who threw the tantrum, apologize. But that doesn’t mean erasing your feelings. You can tell a loved one that you’re sorry for losing control (it’s important to model apologies to your kids, too), and follow up with “I’m still upset about this and that.”

It bears repeating: Make a plan. If, say, your spouse always loses it at the end of the day—the house is a mess, everyone is tired—then set aside time (preferably after a good night’s sleep) to discuss both of your needs, frustrations, and solutions for how to make things smoother. “The best-case scenario is when partners can voice small problems when they come up, rather than store them and then erupt,” says Orenstein. Avoid “all or nothing” language, says Bernstein. (“He never does anything around the house.” “I’m always the one who apologizes first.”) “Focus on the things you have to be grateful for,” he says. “Struggling is normal, but it’s a wave. If you can stay on your belly and hug that surfboard for 20 minutes, it usually calms down.”