



Talking with kids while they are

# THROWING A TANTRUM





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You are grocery shopping with your 2-year old daughter Celina who discovers a lot of interesting things like chocolate, plastic bowls and magazines. She wants you to put these items into the cart and buy them. But you don't need these products and tell her to leave them alone. Celina then wants you to buy three boxes of her favorite cookies. You are telling her: "No Celina, we have some of those cookies at home already. Please put them back on the shelf!" But Celina doesn't obey and insists that you buy her these cookies. She begins to throw a tantrum, and it doesn't seem that she will calm down anytime soon.

What would your reaction be like? You can choose one of the following 5 options. Select one of the possible reactions and go on reading on the indicated page to see how the situation could develop. You will also find explanations as to why it would be advisable not to react in a certain way.

"Ok, little girl!  
Have your cookies!"  
Go to [page 2!](#)

"No Celina, now get up and be a  
good girl! Don't behave like that!"  
Go to [page 3!](#)

"Be quiet right now or else.  
Do you see my hand?"  
Go to [page 4!](#)

"What should I know about  
communicating with toddlers  
while they are throwing a  
tantrum?"  
Go to [page 6!](#)

"I can see that you are  
very angry now."  
Go to [page 5!](#)



You feel relieved that your daughter is quiet again and doesn't disturb the other customers in the store anymore. You prefer to get out of the supermarket as soon as possible, even if you are compelled to buy stuff you don't really need.

But be careful: If you act like this regularly, your daughter will learn that she only needs to scream in public places to get what she wants.

**Advice:** Try to prepare your shopping tour together: make a shopping list, allow your daughter to choose one thing she can buy for her own (e.g.: pencil, banana,...). Let your daughter select the product in the shop and put it in the cart.



You are becoming impatient. You feel like a failure, a father who is unable to control and educate his daughter. Other people look at you, and your face turns red. You think: “What must they be thinking of me?” The whole situation is highly uncomfortable and even embarrassing for you.

**Advice:** Try to remain calm and relaxed. Don’t let your emotions control your actions. They are not good advisors. Your toddler’s tantrum is not meant to offend you personally, even though your feelings may be suggesting this.

Wait a few moments. Remain near your daughter and wait until she calms down. When your child is calm, you can embrace her and try to explain the situation.

Perhaps it is still possible to distract your daughter: “Look, we’ve already put so many delicious items in this cart! Can you imagine what this ice-cream will taste like? And what will Mommy say when she sees all this fresh fruit? Would you please help me now and put the groceries on the belt at the counter?”

To better understand your daughter, see our general information about tantrums on [page 6](#).



Violence is never a solution. This reaction destroys a good and trustful relationship between you and your child. Your child cannot develop a strong and self-confident personality when she experiences regular physical violence. But a democratic society can only exist and grow with mature persons who apply democratic values in practice. Mentally harmed people by any kind of violence cannot act freely and democratically. (To learn more about this, read our [introduction](#).)

Thus, try to stay calm and cool down. Perhaps these actions may help you: Count to ten! Breathe deeply! Vocalize briefly or stomp on the floor!

Read through our general information what you should know about tantrums by toddlers ([page 6](#)). Perhaps this helps you to better understand your toddler and avoid your angry reactions.



This father tries to mirror the feelings and actions of his daughter. He doesn't take the tantrum personally and understands it as an expression of a strong feeling by his daughter, or a non-verbal sign of her tiredness (a 1-hour shopping tour is quite exhausting for a 2-year old girl!). Applying the principles of open communication, the father begins to talk with his daughter about her feelings. This will lead to a successful interaction with his daughter. You want to learn more about "open communication"? See the document ["Talking with kids about homework" chapter "Open communication"](#) on page 4.

The daughter may seem too young for this kind of communication, but this experiment will be worth trying. You could express your understanding for her desire to get these cookies. Then you could explain why it is not possible to satisfy this desire today:

"Mhmmm, you're right: these cookies are delicious. I love them, too. But we bought 3 packs of them the last time we went shopping. Can you remember? So, we don't need to buy any more cookies today. Otherwise the ones we have at home will get stale. Please, help me put these packs back on the shelf and then we go to the checkout counter. Maybe we'll have some of your cookies when we get home."



## ***What should I know about communicating with toddlers while they are throwing a tantrum?***

Every parent knows the feeling of helplessness concerning infant tantrums. Some may feel hurt or offended when toddlers get very angry without any apparent reason. When toddlers don't follow established rules and limitations, parents can also become furious and sometimes feel tempted to use physical violence.

The "terrible twos" phase of toddlers are part of their autonomy-development. When babies learn to talk and walk for the first time, they begin to extend their actions. When turning from babies into toddlers, children discover their own needs and try to satisfy them with the newly learned skills. In so doing, the toddlers' personal needs may conflict with the expectations set by their parents. These conflicts provoke an emotional reaction which can't be actively regulated by the child. When children turn about three or four years old, they begin to learn how to control their emotions.

So, what can parents do to avoid their children's tantrums? How can parents cope with situations which normally lead to tantrums? Here you will find some advice:

- **Don't take the tantrums personally!**

As mentioned before, toddlers (until the age of 4) are unable to control strong emotional reactions. Thus, tantrums are not a reaction against you as a parent. They are an expression of strong emotions which will disappear again.

- **Don't punish or even beat your child!**

Every kind of punishment or physical violence will impair the situation. Your child will become more disappointed and perhaps anxious. Those feelings will even increase the strong emotions and your toddler will scream louder, showing increased destructive behavior. Thus, parental punishment in consequence of temper tantrums is counterproductive.

If you realize that you are also becoming emotionally affected by your child's tantrum, maybe even tempted to beat your child, count to ten and breathe deeply. If this fails to work, scream briefly or stomp on the floor! This may release some of your anger, without harming your child.

- **Express your own feelings!**

If you are emotionally affected, try to express your own emotions by sending I-Messages. In so doing, you can let off steam, without being unfair, and you don't hurt your child. You want to learn more about "I-Messages"? See the document ["Talking to kids about drugs" chapter "I-Messages"](#) on page 6.

- **Remain consequent!**

Toddlers need limits. They must learn to put their own needs and desires on hold to get along in our world. Your toddler may perceive imposed limits as negative restrictions, but they also provide a secure framework and support for keeping your child grounded.

- **Don't interrupt a tantrum but stay with your toddler!**

It is not useful to talk and attempt to discuss something with children during a tantrum because they will not listen. Take care that your children do not hurt themselves and be there to hold them and talk quietly with them when the tantrum is over.

- **Remember your own "terrible twos"!**

Ask your parents, brothers and sisters about your own behavior during your terrible twos. Maybe you can see similarities with your toddler. Ask your parents how they reacted. What did you feel? These reflections might also help you understand the feelings and behavior of your own child.

- **Ask for help!**

If you feel overburdened and unable to cope with your toddler's emotions, don't hesitate to ask for help. Maybe your friends, grandparents or aunts and uncles can take care of your child for a certain time. You can also look for professional help from educational counselors or psychologists.

**„Talking with kids while they are throwing a tantrum” is based on the following references:**

Heueck-Mauss, Doris. 2016. *Das Trotzkopferalter. Erziehungs-ABC mit Tipps und Strategien. Richtiger Umgang mit kindlichen Emotionen*. 8. Aufl. Hannover: Humboldt, 37 ff.