

What NOT to Do When Your Child Is Having a Tantrum

Tips on responding to difficult toddler behavior

This is an excerpt from [The Tantrum Survival Guide](#), by Rebecca Schrag Hersberg, PhD.

Even when we know, as parents, [how we should respond to a tantrum](#), in the heat of the moment we find it hard to resist doing the wrong thing — something that not only doesn't work but makes things worse. Taking a moment to consider why it's particularly crucial to avoid these responses, with some tips on how to do so, can help cement your resolve not to turn to them reflexively.

DON'T invalidate your toddler's perspective or emotions.

When parents describe their toddler's tantrums, they frequently speak in an incredulous tone. "She completely freaks out over the smallest thing!" Parents constantly use this word, "smallest," and the many synonymous words and phrases — "littlest," "most unimportant," "most trivial" — to describe the things that trigger their child's [tantrums](#). On their face, the reasons toddlers throw tantrums can be patently absurd.

And yet, when we are with our children, it's important that we don't laugh, that we take their reactions and experiences seriously. Some examples of invalidating reactions, aside from blatantly laughing at your child, include:

- **"X is not a big deal."** When in the history of the world has this ever worked with anyone? Your toddler or preschooler will never say, "You know what? You're right, Mom. It's totally not. My bad — blew it way out of proportion." Frankly, it's not just kids. No one responds this way. Ever.

- **“Oh come on, it’s only X.”** The “only” here is the big clue that you are patronizing your child by discounting whatever it is she’s upset about. The word “just,” in the same context, is also a giveaway. Be on the lookout for those words — even when said in a seemingly empathic tone — when your little one is falling apart.
- **“There’s nothing to get so upset about.”** Again, think about your own experiences with being upset. Is it ever helpful to be told you’re upset for no reason? No. Either you believe there is a good reason to get so upset or you’re aware of the absence of a “reason” from a logical standpoint, and yet you’re upset anyway. And now you’re also ashamed of being upset, since apparently there’s nothing to get upset about.
- **“You’re being ridiculous.”** This one pretty much speaks for itself. No one likes to be told he’s being ridiculous, whether age two or 42. The same goes for words like “unreasonable” and “irrational.”

DON’T tell your child how to feel.

This is a great general rule (to apply to toddlers, preschoolers, and the rest of humankind) and is particularly relevant for tantrums. These are comments that not only invalidate young children’s emotions and experiences but also instruct them to feel something different than they do — for example, “Don’t be angry,” or “Stop getting so upset!”

I see this a lot around play, particularly when children are attempting to master a skill, such as constructing a building out of blocks or drawing a (more) perfect circle. Often, during these activities, children scream or cry when they “mess up,” prompting parents to rush in to “help,” also known as “do whatever it takes to avoid a meltdown.” Parents immediately tell their child that there’s “nothing to get upset about,” or that they “can try again.”

Although these comments sometimes work to stave off a tantrum in the moment, I’ve often seen young **children get even more upset in response**. In contrast, however, they frequently calm down when **parents simply help label their feeling** or describe the circumstance at hand. “You’re frustrated that it looks more like a rectangle than a circle, huh?” or “You were working so hard,

and then the dog came over and ruined it.” When children have the opportunity to have their emotions heard and understood by their parents, they feel soothed and no longer have to demonstrate their distress with louder screaming or harder crying.

If, on the other hand, they are told often enough not to feel what they feel, toddlers and preschoolers may come to believe that they have the ability to switch their emotions on and off on a dime or — more accurately — that they *should* be able to do so. And not only should they have this magical power, but they should exercise it not when they want to, but when their parents want them to. Young children need to learn that their feelings are part of life — even the difficult ones — and that they come and go, like waves in an ocean we need to ride (an analogy I didn’t make up but often invoke). As parents, we need to model and teach them how to cope with these feelings, not how *not* to have them, which, frankly, won’t work anyway. Also in this category: “Relax!” and “**Calm down!**” Just stop saying that. To everybody. Period.

DON’T lie to your child to head off a tantrum.

Often parents lie — or, ahem, tell half-truths — to avoid simply saying no and having their child experience (and express, likely in tantrum form) disappointment or frustration. Are there times when a little fib is OK? Yes. Once in a while, you can, of course, tell your toddler or preschooler that there are no more cookies, even though you know there’s another unopened box in the pantry. But telling your child that the iPad is broken (when you just don’t want him to use it) or that the toy store is closed (when you just don’t want to stop there on the way home) doesn’t do your child, or you, any favors.

Well, that’s not quite true. It does do you a favor in the short run, as the following 10 minutes will undoubtedly be easier than they might otherwise be. And occasionally you may — for whatever reason — need to prioritize those 10

minutes. But in the long run, getting in the habit of relying on these untruths sets a pretty lousy precedent. If you want your child to be honest with you, you need to be honest with her. Because sooner or later she's going to realize that the iPad doesn't just spontaneously break at a certain time each day, and then what will she start thinking about all the other things you've been telling her? Children need to see parents taking responsibility for setting limits in an open and clear way, which means you need to practice.

DON'T say that your child's behavior is making you sad.

I've heard this one a lot over the years. A child will begin to get angry or upset about something, and a parent will respond by making a sad face or pretending to cry, remarking, "You know it makes me so sad when you act like that."

Children are not responsible for their parents' emotional well-being. This road goes in a single direction, and it's the other one: parents are responsible for their children's emotional well-being. Because of this, attempting to motivate your toddler's behavior by noting the effect on your feelings is a slippery slope. Will it be important for him to learn that his behavior affects other people? Of course. Nonetheless, it's developmentally inappropriate to ask that he act a certain way out of a sense of responsibility for your feelings.

While we're on this topic, I'd cut the whole sentence construction — "you are making me feel X" — from your interactions with your child more generally. The phrasing implies that your child has a whole lot of power, which can feel overwhelming and ultimately lead to [anxiety](#). Saying "I am starting to feel frustrated/angry/upset" is preferable, as the wording implies that your feeling states are your own and models your ability to recognize and label them, then act accordingly — a skill your child will benefit from learning himself.

DON'T take tantrums — and the things your child says before or during them — personally.

Q-TIP is a great acronym (and one whose origin I don't know). That is: Quit Taking It Personally. Write this down, laminate it, and hang it on the wall in every room. Or set an alarm to go off on your phone that reminds you of this every hour on the hour. When your toddler or preschooler is having a tantrum, she may well pull out all the stops. What does that look like? "I hate you!" "You're a bad mommy!" "I want Daddy, not you!" "Go away!" "You're mean!" These things are never easy to hear, especially from your own child. And yet these comments are appropriate expressions of **anger** for children this age.

Becoming angry and responding in kind — "You're mean, too" or (I heard this once) "You're meaner" — does nothing to help alleviate your little one's distress and will undoubtedly escalate the situation. It also implies that the two of you — you and your child — are expected to adhere to similar standards of behavior, which is both false and confusing.

I also don't recommend commenting on your child's decorum or manners in that moment — "Don't talk to me that way" or "Stop being so disrespectful." Sure, your job is to teach your child to be respectful and have good manners, but doing so in this way, at this moment, will almost guarantee that he doesn't actually hear the message.

DON'T use sarcasm.

Although somewhat ubiquitous in this day and age, sarcasm is a rather sophisticated form of communication and one that young children are not able to understand. They may pick up on the fact that your tone doesn't match your words (such as when "very funny" is stated in a bitter or ominous way), but they won't know what to make of that. Sarcasm is frequently confusing for toddlers and preschoolers, as well as belittling. Some examples of sarcastic comments I have heard from parents leading up to or during their child's tantrum:

"Yes, and I want world peace."

“Your life is just so hard.”

“I know! It’s the end of the world!”

“Because is so clearly the most important thing on the planet.”

At best, your toddler or preschooler will feel confused by your use of sarcasm when he is upset. At worst, he will feel demeaned. Either way, it’s an almost certain bet that his distress will go up and the tantrum will get worse and not better.

I want to draw your attention to the fact that “lose your temper” did not make this list of don’ts. Does this mean that I recommend your **completely losing your temper** the next time your toddler has a meltdown? Of course not. But the reason I didn’t include it here is that at some point — maybe not tomorrow or next week — you will. And what’s more? At some point you already have. You raised your voice louder than you meant to, or said something you still regret. Even after you finish this book, you’ll find yourself back there again; you’ll take a nasty tone with your toddler or preschooler, or somehow let a curse word slip out. Both you and your child will survive, and the thing about parenting is that you’ll get another chance — so many other chances — to get it right.