

Chapter 2 Temper Tantrum Basics

What Are Temper Tantrums?

It is important to recognize there are actually two very different types — emotional tantrums and Little Nero tantrums

A temper tantrum is an intense storm of emotions, which are typically anger, loss, disappointment and deep frustration. In toddlers, this emotional outbreak can lead to crying, screaming, back-arching, arms flailing, thrashing, falling down, kicking, biting, hitting, throwing things, banging the head or holding breath.

Living with a young child, especially at a toddler age, sometimes feels like living with a tantrum landmine. They can have tantrums over almost anything. My daughter can wail if her pants are too short after being rolled up (by herself). She can also scream “MINE!” devastatingly two second after handing Dad a toy.

Temper tantrums are unpleasant and disruptive. They are usually sudden and fierce like a summer storm. One minute you and your child are enjoying your meal together. The next minute she's whimpering because you cut her chicken into small pieces but she wants to eat the whole piece by herself.

Although these behaviors are generally referred to as "temper tantrums", it is important to recognize there are actually two very different types: emotional tantrums and Little Nero tantrums (Sunderland, 2006).

Throwing tantrums is not always about trying to control or manipulate parents. For young toddlers (aged 2-3 years old), they are not capable of reasoning or manipulating. They tend to have mostly emotional tantrums when they are upset.

For older children (> 3.5 years old), it is a mixed bag. Older toddlers are still not experts in the emotion regulating department. So they can have emotional tantrums, too.

Unfortunately, depending on parents' reaction to their past behavior, some children learn to use tantrums as a means to get what they want. That's when you have

Little Nero tantrums. But even when children throw a Little Nero tantrum, things can get out of hand and it can turn into an emotional tantrum.

Why Do Emotional Tantrums Happen?

When toddlers have meltdowns, they are telling us that they are in deep pain ... they need our help.

Temper tantrums are natural behaviors. They are part of a toddler's normal development. Tantrums usually result from unmet needs or desires. They are more likely to appear in young children because that is when they learn that they are separate from their parents and want to seek independence but lack the way to do so.

Though you may worry that you are raising a tyrant, take heart – a tantrum throwing toddler is not a spoiled brat. Toddlers' lives may seem cushy. Sure, they have 12 hours of sleep every night, plenty of playing and no working during the day, all their meals prepared for and a bath given while they play with rubber ducks. I'd like that, too. Thank you very much. (Ok, maybe not the bathing part). But the truth is toddlers having emotional tantrums are actually going through hellish turmoil inside.