

# TAMING TANTRUMS

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Children have meltdowns for two reasons. The first reason is that they are **struggling to manage their feelings or do not have the tools to regulate their emotions**. The second reason is because **tantrums have been successful for them in the past**. They've learned that when they have a meltdown, they get what they want pretty quickly. Since tantrums are extremely unpleasant experiences for parents, they tend to react in extremes. They'll either yell, threaten, grab or restrain the child. Or they go to the other extreme: they give in. When tantrums occur, the parent's response affects the likelihood of the behaviour happening again. Here are some ideas to help manage your child's meltdowns effectively.

## WAYS TO MANAGE TANTRUMS FOR KIDS AGED 2 TO 12

### 1. Avoid Tantrums Altogether

Most kids who have frequent meltdowns do it in very predictable situations, such as when it's homework time, bedtime, or time to stop playing. The trigger is usually being asked to do something that's challenging to them or to stop doing something that is fun for them. Anticipating those triggers, and modifying them so that it's easier for the child to engage in that activity is really important. It's important for parents to understand that avoiding a tantrum before it begins does not mean "giving in" to a child's demands. It means setting your child up for success so that there is less likelihood of a tantrum occurring. Furthermore, when kids don't tantrum, they learn to deal with needs and setbacks in a more mature way. If you are having difficulty figuring out which behaviours lead to meltdowns, conduct a **Functional Behavioural Assessment**, which is where you keep track of your child's negative behaviours and pay attention to antecedents (what came right before the behaviour) to look for patterns.



## 2. Use a Firm & Fast Response

When your child begins to act out immediately give a swift response that consists of a few words, such as “no hurting” or “stop that right now”. Do engage in dialogue with your child or speak in lengthy sentences. Do not ask questions. When your child is having a meltdown they are not thinking clearly and minimal verbalizations are important. Try to avoid yelling or correcting your child. If you feel you are about to raise your voice or you cannot walk away, try cooling off by counting to 10 or singing a song in your head.

## 3. 1-2-3 Magic!

I love the idea behind 1-2-3 Magic. This technique utilizes a counting system that is clearly understood by children so they know the consequences of their actions. The secret is not just in the counting, however. The real secret or “magic” comes from parents **not getting emotional or losing their temper**, simply counting. For example, your child starts to melt down...you say “That’s 1”. They continue, you say “That’s 2”, and again you say “That’s 3” and immediately inform them of their consequence, such as a time out or loss of a privilege. 1-2-3 Magic works well for tantrums and also challenging behaviours, such as sibling rivalry, talking back, disrespect, etc.

## 4. Ignore the Behaviour

Ignoring is the simplest strategy to deal with behaviour problems, but in practice, it is one of the most difficult to carry out. It is stressful and unnatural for parents to ignore their own child, especially when they appear to be distressed. To ignore means that you have to have good control, patience, and faith that things will get better. Use ignoring for annoying but harmless behaviours. Do not use ignoring for behaviour that is harmful like hitting or biting. Ignore minor misbehaviour by taking away your attention from the behaviour, not your child. As soon as your child shows a teeny bit of desirable behaviour, give him/her a lot of attention and praise! When you use ignoring for the first time, the negative behaviour will increase. Over time, it will decrease. You can practice ignoring during unstructured time with your child when minor misbehaviour occurs.

## 5. Do Not Teach or Reason

A tantrum is not the time to teach your child calming strategies or to reason with them; after all you do not teach someone to swim when they are drowning. If your child has slipped into the red zone, you really have to wait it out. Prior to the meltdown (yellow zone) is when strategies will work. Refer to Dr. Aubrey’s handout **Quick Calm Down Strategies for Kids** for ideas on how to help your child stay calm in the yellow zone and prevent behaviour from escalating.