

Behavior At-a-Glance: Tantrums

Background: Understanding Tantrum Behavior

Tantrums are a common part of early childhood as children learn to manage big emotions and develop communication and self-regulation skills. What a tantrum looks like can vary—some children may cry, scream, fall to the floor, or throw objects, while others may shut down or withdraw. Understanding why tantrums occur can be very helpful in deciding how best to support a child. After trying these strategies, you can seek additional support at OhioPromise.org/EC-COE.

1 | Prepare

Considerations

Several factors could be affecting a child's tantrum behavior:

- Child could be sick, tired, or hungry
- Shared calming strategies are not used consistently
- Child is still building relationships with new caregivers
- Changes in routines or medical conditions

Communication

What are all ways the child makes their needs known? Build on communication skills such as:

- Eye gaze
- Gestures, signs, sounds, words
- Taking your hand and leading you
- Picture cards or a device

2 | Observe

Before

What do you notice before the child starts to tantrum? Some examples could be:

- The child was told to stop an activity they enjoyed
- A caregiver just dropped the child off in the classroom
- A friend took a ball from the child

During

Write down exactly what the tantrum looks like. Here are some ideas:

- The child screamed in the adult's face
- The child started crying and kicked at the door
- The child dropped their body to the ground and yelled

After

What happens after? How did others respond? Some things that might be happening:

- The adult walked away, and the child continued playing
- The caregiver came back in the room to pick them up
- A teacher grabbed the ball from the friend and gave it back to the child

Family Connection

Early care and education professionals can partner with families to address tantrum behavior. Share with one another what the tantrums look like, how often, how long, or how intense they may be. Validate that navigating tantrums may be hard, yet positive strategies can be put in place. Ask questions such as:

1. "Is your child hurting themselves or others? How do you respond when the tantrums occur?"
2. "What seems to help your child calm down? Do they have a favorite comfort item?"
3. "Are there any signals or cues that a tantrum might happen?"

3 | Strong Starts

Before going in depth on a particular plan, start with these recommendations:

1. Create a fun and engaging learning space with predictable routines
2. Plan opportunities for meaningful connections with classmates and adults
3. Aim for 5 positive interactions for every correction you give
4. Be the example of how to communicate positively with words and action

4 | Support with Strategies

Attention/Connection

- Teach the child how to communicate and connect with you using words, signs, picture cards, or gestures
- Respond calmly to tantrums, be present in the moment and keep their body safe
- Build relationships with other caregivers so it's not just one teacher they always want

Escape/Avoidance

- Check if the activity is too hard for the child to do or if a skill is missing
- Start with shorter turns for an activity and/or teach how to ask for a break
- Have favorite items in the center with them

Tangible- Access to Item or Activity

- If tantrums get the child an item, build skills for the child to request the item instead
- Notice patterns of when the child tends to want an item, be prepared ahead of time
- Give access to a desired toy or activity after the child completes a tough task or uses positive behaviors

Sensory

- Separate and define active and calm areas, along with scheduling sensory breaks.
- Provide a safe space to work through a tantrum.
- Show how to take deep breaths, use sensory items, give space, or seek comfort

Quick-Reference: Strategies by Function

Function	What to Look For	What to Work On	How to Reinforce
Escape	Tantrums when it's time to go inside	Provide transition cues/items, use First/Then	Have preferred items at the door, praise after transition
Attention	Tantrums when you walk away	Provide choices for activities or make wait time more interesting	If possible, return and play while they are calm
Tangible	Tantrums when they want more snack	"More" or "Eat"	Offer snack after a communication attempt
Sensory	Tantrums when overstimulated	Adjust the environment and use calming ideas	Calm with the child or provide sensory items

5 | Reflect and Revise

Working through tantrums takes time. Try to remain calm as you support the child's learning. Reflect on the questions below, revisit the steps above, and seek additional support if needed.

- "What changes have we seen since using our strategies consistently for at least 2 weeks?"
- "What are some additional strategies we could put in place to reduce tantrums?"
- "How have we been reinforcing the positive behaviors we wish to see?"