

Tempers & Tears

It's a long way from being a helpless baby to becoming a relatively independent three or four-year-old, ready to go to playgroup or nursery. It can be an exciting journey of discovery – but it can also seem like a very bumpy ride for both you and your child.

As children move towards their second birthday, they want to take part in what is going on around them – exploring and playing, watching and imitating others, using their first words and discovering their effect. They now feel that they are a person in an interesting world of other people, and they want to join in.



What it is like to be two or three

But these developments are not just a straightforward matter of the emergence of new capacities.

Your two-year-old is also discovering all sorts of things that they can't do or mustn't do. They are waging a constant battle with their own passionate wants, hopes and fears.

They have feelings that they can't yet manage by themselves without tempers or tears. They are still struggling to sort out who they are and what they feel about the people who care for them – why they love them one moment and hate them the next. Because of this they often can't just ask for your help. Instead, they mess you around with contradictory demands because that's how helpless and confused they feel.

Young children of two or three can suddenly seem very different creatures from the baby they were just a short time earlier. They are reacting to the world as full of triumphs and setbacks so they need different kinds of support from the adults caring for them.

Being bossy

Some children can't bear to feel little and helpless. They refuse to accept that there are things they can't yet manage. Being bossy can be a way of covering this up and trying to make others feel small. They can be so convincing that, as parents, we may sometimes come to believe they don't need us or may feel so irritated that we want to cut them down to size.

But bossy two-year olds really need someone to offer them love and care even when they don't seem to want it.

Being fussy

Many children of two or three develop all sorts of fads and rituals that they absolutely insist on. From a parent's point of view, it can seem silly and tyrannical, but how does it look to a small child?

Everyone is expecting them to give up being a baby and become more independent "you're a big girl/boy now". But they may feel as if the grown-ups are always interfering and bossing them around. When they insist on wearing something strange or doing something in a particular order, they may be trying to get you to recognize that they have their own choices and preferences.

Sometimes it's probably helpful to give in gracefully over things that don't really matter. That way they will get the chance to learn how to back down themselves. And, of course, there are going to be plenty of times when they want something impossible or dangerous. So, there will still be opportunities for them to learn about 'no' and for you to learn to cope with their distress and anger.

Sometimes fussiness and 'fads' are to do with worries that your child can't name or tell you about. Then their determination to avoid certain objects or situations may be their way of controlling their fears.

What's worrying them may not have any obvious connection with the things they're making a fuss about – but it's easier to control what you let your mum put on your plate than to control anxieties you don't understand.

These sorts of fears tend to come and go, but if your child's behavior becomes especially difficult it

is worth wondering if they are under some particular stress – a new baby on the way or stresses and worries among the adults. Even if you feel sure they don't know about these things they will pick up on the atmospheres around them.

Being clingy

Some children seem to be saying 'I'd rather be small'. A child who is clingy and fearful can be very trying to parents in a different way from one who is bossy.

As parents, we need the reassurance of seeing things move in the right general direction. So 'babyish' behaviour is hard to bear because it makes us worry that things are going backwards. It's also very exhausting not knowing if you've got a baby or a big girl or boy on your hands.

When you have the feeling that you can't get it right, the chances are that your child is feeling in a tremendous muddle too.

Being fearful

Children of two or three sometimes feel quite scared when faced with new situations, especially if they think it means being left with other people or being expected to be a big girl or boy when they feel small and worried. It is worth being truthful about new situations – such as the birth of a baby or different childcare arrangement – so that they don't feel taken by surprise or tricked. Allow plenty of time for settling in and a certain amount of fussing.

And be prepared to take your child seriously if they really feel they are not ready for a new step forward.

But some of the frightening things that trouble a 2 or 3-year-old are inside them rather than being events in the outside world. It is part of growing up that they experience their mind in this way. They may become frightened on the dark, the noises in the pipes, and these thoughts can then appear as bad dreams.

Sometimes these dreams may be connected with worrying events that happened during the day, but quite often they seem to grow from their own strong feelings and wishes.

You may never really know what's troubling them, but it's very comforting for a child who can't yet understand themselves if they feel that a grown up is trying to do the understanding for them.

Temper tantrums

Your child is coping with strong feelings all day long. If they're managing to keep on a reasonably even keel they're doing well, but there are bound to be times when they can't cope.

When your child throws a temper tantrum, they are showing you what it feels like inside them when they can no longer cope. This could simply be because they are exhausted or overwhelmed.

They are not doing it just to get attention. They have a tantrum because they can't tell you in words. They scream and throw themselves around because they feel their big self has exploded.

They are probably scared, as well as angry, because their rage seems so powerful and dangerous and they have lost their picture of Mummy and Daddy as helpful or friendly. They don't need you to

come up with a solution or to buy them off with treats (though everyone has done that at times). They do need to see that you can feel upset and helpless but still keep them safe from hurting themselves, take care of both of you and go on loving them.

How can parents cope?

Coping with your child's tantrums doesn't mean trying to stop them being angry – it means coping with how angry they make you feel. In the heat of the moment it is easy to become just as angry as your child and to scream back. You cannot be a perfect parent and it would not be helpful if you could, but it is important to keep trying to control your own feelings when your child's feelings are out of control.

As parents we feel helpless, embarrassed or exposed if our children have tantrums in public. Even at home there are going to be times when they drive us too far.

Firmness is important, but so are understanding and tolerance.

Simply telling a child to behave better doesn't give them the strength to control their feelings. They can only learn slowly how to share with other children and to accept people saying 'no' when they want something.

Children learn by example, so they learn that it is possible to be distressed or angry without throwing a tantrum through seeing us struggling to cope with our own frustration or worry.

Getting to the end of your tether

Sometimes parents feel they are no longer able to keep going. They may become frightened that they will injure their child physically or emotionally.

You may feel you don't have enough help and support. You may have too many worries on your plate. You may feel depressed or unwell.

If you feel this is happening to you, for the sake of your child and yourself, you should seek help to sort out what's wrong.

Some helpful practical tips

- Unless they are doing something dangerous, or could accidentally hurt themselves, count to 10 before doing anything at all.
- Try not to get drawn into an argument about exactly what started it – they really are beyond reasoning with.
- Don't ask more of them than they can manage.
- Try to avoid saying things just to hurt them back – especially threats of leaving home or having them put away. You may not mean it, but they don't know that.
- Don't worry about them growing up to be a monster. The temper tantrums of a two and three-year-old will start to tail off – but only slowly. It may take two or three years.
- Try to remember that through their tempers they're learning important lessons about themselves – and both of you are practising for when they're a teenager!

About this leaflet

Understanding Childhood is a series of leaflets written by experienced child and adolescent psychoanalytic psychotherapists to give parents, grandparents, carers and professionals additional insight into children's feelings and view of the world and to help make sense of their behaviour. Originally written for the Child Psychotherapy Trust they have been reviewed and updated and are now published by the ACP. The full series is available on the ACP website

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