

De-escalating Tantrums in Early Childhood Classrooms

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PRACTITIONER NOTES



BACKGROUND: *Tantrums* are episodes of crying, hitting, kicking, throwing objects, or falling to the floor. Tantrums are common, and considered developmentally appropriate from around 1 to 4 years of age. Tantrums may occur due to children’s limited coping or language skills, efforts to seek attention or get their own way, or avoid activities (Daniels, Mandleco & Luthy, 2012; Potegal & Davidson, 2003). We present three approaches for helping prevent and de-escalate tantrums. In addition, we provide an example involving Luke, a typically developing 2-year old attending center-based care who is sometimes prone to tantrums, especially during transitions between activities.

1) Focus on prevention.

- Practice alternative behaviors and coping skills when the child is calm and relaxed.
- Make sure the child’s physical needs are met.
- Give advance warning for activities.
- Ensure that the child has the skills required to the complete task and understands what is being asked of him.

2) Support the child.

- Ignore attention-seeking behavior and focus on helping the child accomplish his/her goal.
- Acknowledge the child’s feelings and label emotions.

3) Stay calm and respond consistently when tantrums happen

- Use clear language and restate questions and choices as needed.
- Ask for help from a co-worker if needed.

APPLICATION: In the scenario below, we see Emily, the classroom teacher, work to de-escalate Luke’s tantrum.

Luke is playing with blocks. Emily says, “It is time to get your shoes on to go outside. Would you like to put them on now or in 5 minutes?” Luke holds up five fingers. Emily says, “You chose 5 minutes. I will be back in 5 to remind you to put your shoes on.” Emily returns, saying, “Luke, it has been 5 minutes. Time to put your shoes on.” Luke yells “NO!” and throws his body on the ground saying, “No shoes! I don’t wanna!”

Emily brings Luke his shoes and sits next to him saying, “I know you can put these shoes on your feet, but your face and words tell me you are very upset. It’s hard when you have to do something that you don’t want to do, but it’s time to go outside. You can put your shoes on, or I can help. You choose.”

Luke continues to cry and throws his shoe. Emily picks up the other shoe and says, “It looks like you’re choosing to have a teacher help you. When you are ready, you can do this by yourself.” Emily uses a hand-over-hand technique to help Luke put his first shoe on. Emily helps him walk over to the second shoe and applies the same technique. Then Emily says, “Your shoes are on. Now it’s time to go outside! Should we walk or hop to the door?”

TO LEARN MORE:

[Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning](#)
[Monroe Carell Jr. Children’s Hospital at Vanderbilt](#)

REFERENCES:

- Daniels, E., Mandleco, B., & Luthy, K. E. (2012). Assessment, management, and prevention of childhood temper tantrums. *Journal of the American Academy of Nurse Practitioners*, 24(10), 569-573.
- Potegal, M., & Davidson, R. J. (2003). Temper tantrums in young children: 1. Behavioral composition. *Journal of Developmental & Behavioral Pediatrics*, 24(3), 140-147.