

It's not summer without kid's games at the local county fair! My four-year-old excitedly participated in the pig contest. When his attempts to catch the animal failed, he wailed! Are you like me as a parent, and try to make a tantrum stop?

Researchers at Berkeley University's [Greater Good Science Center](#) have studied the meltdowns that can be frequent occurrences when children (and their parents) are frustrated and stressed. The science behind tantrums tells us they aren't breakdowns of behavior—they're breakthroughs of communication.

Understanding what's really happening during meltdowns can help us respond to our children in a way that supports them... and makes things easier for us, too!

Root Causes of Tantrums

Tantrums aren't defiance—they're a child's way of expressing unmet needs. They often stem from:

- **Frustration with independence:** Kids get upset when they can't complete tasks just beyond their ability.
- **Limits and authority:** Toddlers react strongly to boundaries, which may feel unfair to them.
- **Sharing and social struggles:** Young children lack the development to truly share, leading to meltdowns.
- **Unmet basic needs:** Hunger, tiredness, or lack of connection can quickly trigger tantrums.

Understanding these root causes helps reduce tantrum frequency and improves communication.

Is there a better way to respond to tantrums?

1. **Stay Regulated yourself.** Practice an exercise such as a breathing technique. Reframe your mindset by stating 'This isn't personal, my child is dysregulated'. This does not excuse difficult behavior but helps us respond with understanding rather than a surge of frustration ourselves.
2. **Don't punish, but don't give in.** Avoid dismissing your child's emotions or punishing them during a tantrum. They're not being defiant—they're overwhelmed and need your help to calm down. Stay calm yourself; reacting with anger only escalates things and puts unfair pressure on your child to manage your emotions too.
3. **Validate your child's experience.**
After a tantrum, wait until your child is truly calm before talking. Use the Validation Ladder:
Be present: Give full attention, no distractions.
Reflect: "You felt angry when we left the playground?" This tells your child their feelings matter.
Contextualize: "You were excited to play, so it makes sense you're upset."
Propose: Try digging a little deeper. "Maybe you're also worried we won't come back soon?"
Empathize: "That sounds really disappointing." Be sure your voice tells you really mean what you are saying.
Take Action: Think about what you could do differently. "Next time, I'll give a 5-minute warning."

Validation helps kids feel understood—not indulged—and reduces future meltdowns.

4. **Build support over time.**

As kids grow, they can express how they want support. Use calm moments to reflect patterns or offer choices: “Do you want me close or to give space when you’re upset?”

5. **Stay curious.**

Look beyond behavior to understand the need or emotion driving it.

Parenting is not easy and it’s probably the most important job you can have. I hope to navigate it well by continually learning. For more information contact Tara Solomon-Smith, tsolomon@ksu.edu, 620-244-3826.

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