

# Emotional reactions

Trying to calm a furious toddler can feel like trying to defuse a bomb, but there are ways to ease the process, says **Sue Cowley**...

One key life skill that young children must learn is how to control their emotional reactions. When they are small, children's behaviour is very sensitive to both internal and external factors. A child who is tired, over-stimulated, under-stimulated, hungry or upset can struggle to regulate his or her behaviour. The full-blown tantrum is a classic symptom of a child who is not coping well with his or her own emotional state. We've all heard of the 'terrible twos', but some children will continue to have tantrums well beyond this age.

## The scenario

At first, Trudie seemed to settle well into your setting. She was quiet but staff assumed she needed to build her confidence and get used to her new environment. A few days after arriving, however, Trudie grabbed a toy from another child. When you asked her to return it, Trudie exploded. It was like watching a volcanic eruption as she hung on to the toy and began to scream, "It's mine!". When her ear-piercing screams had subsided, she threw herself to the floor and began to sob uncontrollably, writhing from side to side, lashing out at anyone who came near. It took several members of staff some time to calm her down. Since then, Trudie has thrown a series of tantrums, each one more explosive than the last...

## The issue

In many ways, a tantrum is a normal emotional reaction to a difficult situation, if a

child has not yet learned to regulate his or her behaviour. The reaction of the adults to the child when this happens is crucial in helping the child to learn to control his or her emotional thermostat. It is upsetting to see a child who has lost emotional control, but our instinctive response is not necessarily helpful. Sometimes we overreact, giving in to the child's demands, or desperately trying to calm the child down rather than letting the child learn to calm him or herself. Where this has happened at home, the child learns that screaming and crying is a great way to get adult attention. They are effectively taught that they can control the behaviour of grown-ups by having a tantrum.

## Dealing with the behaviour

**Children need to learn how to regulate their own emotions, and you can support all your children to do this, in a variety of ways.**

- 1 Talk regularly about emotions - give your children the opportunity to discuss their feelings, and help them to understand how our behaviour makes other people feel.
- 2 Model emotions for your children. Talk about what makes you angry or upset, and how you deal with it. Discuss how to make good choices around behaviour.
- 3 Incorporate activities that help your children calm themselves - playing sleeping lions, doing a yoga session, or going on walks outdoors.



**about the author**  
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- 4 Ensure there are areas in your setting where children can go to be still and quiet, especially when they are tired.
- 5 Balance the way that your day runs, incorporating quiet times, so that the children are less likely to become over-stimulated.
- 6 Support parents in dealing with their child's behaviour at home by passing on advice, for instance, via newsletters, blogs or workshops.

## Finding solutions

**A tantrum is a habitual response, and you will need to work together with Trudie's parents to help her break this habit:**

- Have a meeting with Trudie's parents to explain the situation. Discuss whether she also does this at home, what the 'triggers' might be, and how they react.
- Explain the approach you are going to take when Trudie has a tantrum, so that the parents are aware of the strategies you will use, and the thinking behind them. Encourage them to take a similar approach at home.
- Consider how you can make your setting a place where all children have the space and opportunity to feel calm and secure. Identify the times of day when Trudie seems most likely to 'kick off' - can you identify a specific 'trigger'?
- When Trudie throws a tantrum, ensure that she is safe, and that she cannot hurt anyone else. Ask other children to move away from her. However, do not give in to her demands to pacify or reason with her. Instead, talk quietly to her, using phrases such as "I can see that you are upset" and "I need you to calm down now, Trudie." Encourage her to breathe, using a soothing voice to help her calm herself.
- If Trudie looks likely to hurt herself, gently intervene, for instance, by giving her a cuddle. Over time, these techniques will help Trudie to learn to calm herself, rather than the adults always doing this for her.

