

Helping Toddlers and Pre-schoolers

Younger children are only beginning to learn to manage their emotions, and therefore it is normal for them to temper tantrum, show hostility and physical aggression. At this stage, sometimes it is difficult to manage their behaviour, as they are developing their autonomy. It is common to hear “no”, “mine”, or “I’ll do it myself”, which can be exasperating for parents. These behaviours can be even more difficult to manage when your child is unwell for a number of reasons, such as not wanting to discipline your child when they are sick, or having to manage difficult behaviours in an unfamiliar environment, such as when staying in hospital. Below are some guidelines that may be helpful:

- ✔ **Give frequent reassurance.** Your child will look to you when they are uncertain about their situation. Giving your child this reassurance will help them know that you continue to love and care for them.
- ✔ **Reinforce family rules or expectations regarding behaviour.** All children benefit from clear limits and understanding the expectations of them. This will help them feel safe and secure.
- ✔ **Maintain routines and rituals as best you can.** This may include, but not limited to, bedtime, bath time, sleeping and eating routines.
- ✔ **Learn your child’s triggers.** Try to learn and identify tantrum triggers, and intervene early. Some common triggers include when your child is hungry, tired, bored, or overstimulated. Try to interpret your child’s behaviour, as it is a good communication tool. There may be cues that your child will give you before they become too upset. If you are aware of how your child is feeling, you may be able to distract them before they become upset.
- ✔ **Practice ‘active listening’.** Letting your child know that you hear them can be useful. Younger children can get frustrated a lot. Repeating back to them what you think they might be feeling can help to relieve some of their tension and can help comfort them. It will also serve to assist them to develop language around their feelings.
- ✔ **Encourage verbal and physical outlets for emotions that are acceptable in your family.** Acceptable behaviours may include banging pots, crying, yelling or punching a pillow. Teach young children to use these acceptable behaviours over other unacceptable ones.
- ✔ **Reward good behaviour and coping strategies when you can.** Catch them being ‘good’ and giving positive feedback whenever this occurs e.g. you were playing so nicely, I like that you shared your toys with your sister, OR you took your medicine really quickly today.
- ✔ **Try not to take it personally.** Try to remember that your child is not having tantrums to get to you or upset you. Children do not deliberately throw tantrums; they are either stuck in a bad habit or do not have the skills right now to cope with the situation.
- ✔ **Keep promises and be honest.** When you follow through on your promises, good or bad, then your child will learn to trust and respect you. This will help your child feel more secure, as it creates a consistent and predictable environment.
- ✔ **Choose your battles.** Before you intervene in matters and behaviours, check in with yourself about its importance. By keeping instructions and requests to a minimum, there is less opportunity for conflict and negative interactions. Rules are important, but it will be useful to reserve these for the most important things. Your priorities may also change when your child is sick, so this will be helpful if the rules reflect this, and your child knows what to expect.
- ✔ **Keep instructions simple and clear.** This will help your child know what to expect e.g. please hold my hand when you cross the street.
- ✔ **Prepare for challenging situations.** When your child is sick, you will both face a number of different challenges. It may be helpful to think about these situations in advance, and help your child to

prepare for what is ahead. Assess how much information your child might need in advance, as every child is different.

- ✔ **Use distraction.** Try to distract your child by giving them something else to do. Let them help you cook dinner or let them choose a snack that you approve of. This may avoid the tantrum.
- ✔ **Utilise humour.** This can help deescalate a situation, and is a great distraction technique.
- ✔ **Know your own limits.** Be gentle with yourself, and when you know that you have reached your limit. It might be helpful to remove yourself from the situation for a short time, such as handing your child over to your partner, or sitting them in front of a DVD, while you take a shower.

If you are concerned about your child's level of behavioural or emotional distress, talk to your treating team about a referral to the mental health team.

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