

# Stages of a Temper Tantrum

**1. Rumbling and Grumbling:** child becomes grouchy, complaining, irritable, ‘chip on shoulder’. Sooner or later the child develops an issue to express his/her upset.

Inner Dynamics: rumbling and grumbling reflect vague internal sense of discomfort, growing helplessness and near panic.



Management Suggestions: Watch carefully. Do not provoke, but accept; the child may need to have a tantrum. Remember that it is not always helpful to prevent or postpone a tantrum.

**2. Help-Help:** Child has found a disturbing issue and gets loud, noisy and disruptive. The signal is usually very visible and deliberate with breaking action, e.g. attacking another, getting self-attacked, breaking, cursing, or sexually misbehaving. The child “gives up his panic in order to call ‘help, help’”.

Inner Dynamics: Child’s inner controls break down and impulses flood the situation; the adult must become the child’s “protective ego” and model restraint skills; child feels tremendous defeat which is not shown, except in rage and anger turned against the adult.



Management Suggestions: Protect firmly but not with hostility or guilt. Use necessary force to restrain, but hold from behind to reduce danger. Tell the child what you are doing, e.g. “I am going to keep control for you. I will not let you hurt yourself or anybody else.” The aim is to assure safety and control; not to attempt calm or insight-promoting talk. If holding can be safely avoided or postponed, do so.

**3. Either/Or:** The child expresses impossible demands, threats or an alternative, e.g. “either you let kill him or I’ll kill you”, “Fix my plane now or I will smash it”. Verbal behavior filled with grandiose, omnipotent statements; often heaps insults and verbal abuse on the adult.

Inner Dynamics: The child tries to compensate for own loss of ego-control by demonstrating great power and authority through unrealistic, hostile statements. The Child shows his need to be in control of the environment, while feeling out-of-control of own impulses.



Management Suggestions: Try to channel absurd “either/ors” to legitimate ones, e.g. “we can try to fix or replace the plane later”. Maintain time and place boundaries to keep in touch with reality, e.g. “We’ll stay here and work through this blow-up by lunch time.” Seek other alternatives to help the child cope, e.g. “You can’t kill him or me, but you can tell him how mad he made you.” Model reasonable anger, e.g. “I’m angry with how wild you are acting. I know you don’t have to do all this and can handle it through better ways.”

**4. No-No:** The child becomes totally negative and oppositional, e.g. “Don’t talk to me.” “Shut up.” “Don’t touch my desk.”

Inner dynamics: Negativism is a sign of defense of the child’s own identity. The child is saying, “I can’t cause any effective action, but I don’t have to do what you want.”



Management Suggestions: Avoid arguing, explaining rules, or talking about helping the child. Acknowledge your desire for the child to regain more and more self-control, e.g. “It’s important for you to be in charge of yourself again.” “It’ll be up to you to make some decisions about when we’ll go back to the group.”

**5. Leave Me Alone:** The child begins to withdraw, show fatigue, physical discomfort, depression; indicates that s/he does not want to be with anyone, “Don’t talk to me.” “Go away.” “Why don’t you get out of here.”

Inner Dynamics: A sense of defeat and brief depression sets in and s/he wants to retreat from the world and “lick his/her wounds”.



Management Suggestions: Respect the wish for privacy and withdrawal, but do not see it as a sign of strength or recovery. Stay with the child although giving some distance is helpful. Messages should be brief, quiet and calm. Share your concern and availability. Acknowledge the child’s sadness.

**6. Hangover:** The child may be over the tantrum and look as though “nothing ever happened” or may look hung-over, worn out, bleary-eyed, self-blaming or complaining. Hangovers are useful since they make it more possible to teach an alternative to the tantrum afterwards.

Inner Dynamics: Lack of any after-effects indicates sealing up of defenses and prevents any new learning. Hangover, on the other hand, reflects some continued distress which can be worked with.

Management Suggestions: Try to promote post-tantrum awareness for the child. Focus on cues leading to the tantrum; alternative ways that being upset might be handled; how others reacted, and/or how the child can build tolerance for anxiety that precedes tantrum. Promote understanding or stages of tantrumming to help the child avoid seeing him/herself as “crazy” or “bad”.