

temper and tears

in the twos and threes

Understanding Childhood

is a series of leaflets written by experienced child psychotherapists to give insight into the child's feelings and view of the world and help parents, and those who work with children, to make sense of their behaviour.



It's a long way from being a helpless baby to becoming a relatively independent three or four year old, ready to go to playgroup or nursery. It can be an exciting journey of discovery – but it can also seem like a very bumpy ride for both you and your child.

As children move towards their second birthday, they want to take part in what is going on around them – exploring and playing, watching and imitating others, using their first words. They now feel that they are a person in an interesting world of other people and they want to join in.

What it is like to be two or three

Your two year old is discovering all sorts of things that they can't do or mustn't do. They are waging a constant battle with their own passionate wants, hopes and fears.

They have feelings that they can't yet manage by themselves without tempers or

tears. They are still struggling to sort out who they are and what they feel about the people who care for them – why they love them one moment and hate them the next. They can't just ask for your help. Instead, they mess you around with contradictory demands because that's how helpless and confused they feel.

Young children react very differently to the triumphs and setbacks of their second and third years so they need different kinds of support from their parents.

Being bossy

Some children can't bear to feel little and helpless. They refuse to accept that there are things they can't yet manage. Being bossy can be a way of covering this up and trying to make others feel small. They can be so convincing that, as parents, we may sometimes come to believe they don't need us or may feel so irritated that we want to cut them down to size.

But bossy two year olds really need someone to offer them love and care even when they don't seem to want it.

This leaflet was originally published by the Child Psychotherapy Trust.

Leaflets available from:

www.understandingchildhood.net

email:
info@understandingchildhood.net

Being fussy

Many children of two or three develop all sorts of fads and rituals that they absolutely insist on. From a parent's point of view it can seem silly and tyrannical, but how does it look to a small child?



Everyone is expecting them to give up being a baby and become more independent. But they may feel as if the grown-ups are always interfering and bossing them around. When they insist on wearing something strange, or doing things in a particular order, they may be trying to get you to recognise that they have their own choices and preferences.

Sometimes it's probably helpful to give in gracefully over things that don't really matter. That way they will get the chance to learn how to back down themselves. And, of course, there are going to be plenty of times when they want something impossible or dangerous. So there will still be opportunities for them to learn about 'no' and for you to learn to cope with their tears.

Sometimes fussiness is to do with worries that your child can't name or tell you about. Then their determination to avoid certain objects or situations may be their way of controlling their fears.

What's worrying them may not have any obvious connection with the things they're making a fuss about – but it's easier to control what you let your mum put on your plate than to control anxieties you don't understand.

These sorts of fears tend to come and go, but if your child's behaviour becomes especially difficult it is worth wondering if they are under some particular stress.

Being clingy

Some children seem to be saying 'I'd rather be small'. A child who is clingy and fearful can be very trying to parents in a different way from one who is bossy.

As parents, we need the reassurance of seeing things move in the right general direction. So 'babyish' behaviour is hard to bear because it makes us worry that things are

going backwards. It's also very exhausting not knowing if you've got a baby or a big girl or boy on your hands.

When you have the feeling that you can't get it right, the chances are that your child is feeling in a tremendous muddle too.

Being fearful

New situations can be frightening. Children of two or three sometimes feel quite scared about new situations, especially if they think it means being left with other people. It is worth being truthful about new situations – such as the birth of a baby or different childcare arrangements – so that they don't feel taken by surprise or tricked. Allow plenty of time for settling in and a certain amount of fussing. And be prepared to take your child seriously if they really feel they are not ready for a new step forward.

But some of the frightening things are inside them.

It is at this age that children first complain of bad dreams or night terrors. Sometimes the dreams may be connected with worrying events that happened during the day, but quite often they seem to grow from feelings within the child.

You may never really know what's troubling them, but it's very comforting for a child who can't yet understand themselves if they feel that a grown up is trying to do the understanding for them.

Useful Understanding Childhood leaflets

Sibling rivalry

Separation and changes in the early years

Temper tantrums

Your child is coping with strong feelings all day long. If they're managing to keep on a reasonably even keel they're doing well, but there are bound to be times when they can't cope.

When your child throws a temper tantrum they are showing you what it feels like inside them when they can no longer cope. This could simply be because they are exhausted or overwhelmed.

They are not doing it just to get attention. They have a tantrum because they can't tell you in words. They scream and throw

themselves around because they feel their big self has exploded.

They are probably scared, as well as angry, because their rage seems so powerful and dangerous and they have lost their picture of Mummy and Daddy as helpful or friendly.

They don't need you to come up with a solution or to buy them off with treats (though every one has done that at times). They do need to see that you can feel upset and helpless but still keep them safe from hurting themselves, take care of both of you and go on loving them.

Is there a real problem?

Sometimes parents feel that their child's temper tantrums are not just the ordinary sort that they will grow out of.

Perhaps they feel that their child has never really started talking or doesn't enjoy playing or being with other people. They may be restless and destructive as if they can't take pleasure in anything. And – most painful of all – parents in this situation may feel that there is a barrier between themselves and their child.

If you have concerns of this sort, it is important to ask for specialist advice. It is not a good idea to just leave things in the hope that they will sort themselves out.

How can parents cope?

Coping with your child's tantrums doesn't mean trying to stop them being angry – it means coping with how angry they make *you* feel. In the heat of the moment it is easy to become just as angry as your child and to scream back. You are not expected to be perfect parents but you *are* expected to be able to control your own feelings when your child's feelings are out of control.

As parents we feel helpless, embarrassed or exposed if our children have tantrums in public. Even at home there are going to be times when they drive us too far.

Firmness is important, but so are understanding and tolerance. Simply telling a child to behave better doesn't give them the strength to control their feelings. They can only learn slowly how to share with other children and to accept people saying 'no' when they want something.

Children learn by example, so they learn that it is possible to be distressed or angry

without throwing a tantrum through seeing us struggling to cope with our own frustration or worry.

Getting to the end of your tether

Sometimes parents feel they are no longer able to keep going. They may become frightened that they will injure their child physically or emotionally.

You may feel you don't have enough help and support. You may have too many worries on your plate. You may feel depressed or unwell.

If you feel this is happening to you, for the sake of your child and yourself, you should seek help to sort out what's wrong.

Useful Understanding Childhood leaflets *Postnatal depression*

Some helpful practical tips

- Unless they are doing something dangerous, or could accidentally hurt themselves, count to 10 before doing anything at all.
- Try not to get drawn into an argument about exactly what started it – they really are beyond reasoning with.
- Don't ask more of them than they can manage.
- Try to avoid saying things just to hurt them back – especially threats of leaving home or having them put away. You may not mean it but they don't know that.
- Don't worry about them growing up to be a monster. The temper tantrums of a two and three year old will start to tail off – but only slowly. It may take two or three years.
- Try to remember that through their tempers they're learning important lessons about themselves – and both of you are practising for when they're a teenager!

Further help

In every area there are organisations that provide support and services for children and families. Your GP or health visitor will be able to offer you advice and, if needed, refer you to specialist services. To find out more about local supporting agencies, visit your library, your town or county hall, or contact your local council for voluntary service.

Contacts

Sure Start

There are a number of Sure Start programmes in the UK offering services and information for parents and children under four. To find if there is one in your area contact:

Phone 0870 0002288

Web www.surestart.gov.uk

YoungMinds Parents' Information Service

Information and advice for anyone concerned about the mental health of a child or young person.

Freephone 0800 018 2138

Web www.youngminds.org.uk

Parentline

Help and advice for anyone looking after a child.

Freephone 0808 800 2222

Web www.parentlineplus.org.uk

ChildcareLink

Information about child care and early years services in your local area.

Freephone 0800 096 0296

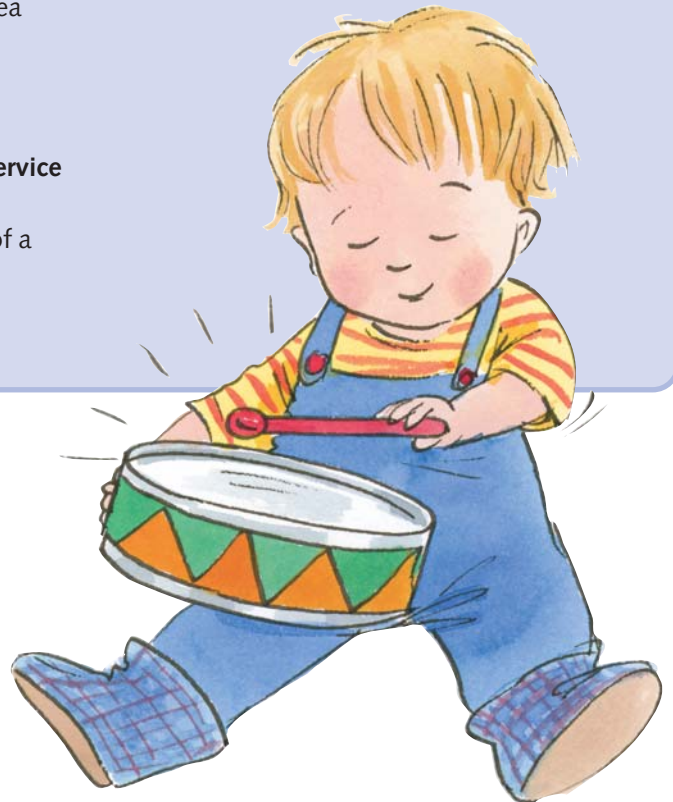
Web www.childcarelink.gov.uk

Contact a Family

Help for parents and families who care for children with any disability or special need.

Freephone 0808 808 3555

Web www.cafamily.org.uk



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