

## Tantrums

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### Tantrums – what is normal?

It's normal for young children to have occasional tantrums that last 10 or 11 minutes and all children are more likely to display extreme behaviours if they're very tired, hungry or sick. Frequent, extra-long or aggressive tantrums are not normal<sup>1</sup>.

### Warning signs:

1. Extremely aggressive behavior during a tantrum such as aggression directed at a caregiver or violently destructive behavior toward an object such as a toy
2. Children who intentionally injure themselves during tantrums - such as head-banging, scratching until the skin bleeds or biting themselves
3. Frequent tantrums - children who have more than five tantrums a day for several consecutive days
4. Extra long tantrums - e.g. more than 25 minutes per tantrum
5. Children who are unable to calm themselves following a tantrum

While researchers warn that excessive tantrum behaviour can be a symptom of mental health problems such as depression or disruptive behavioural conditions<sup>1</sup>, we find that unusual tantrums can be a symptom of food intolerance<sup>2,3,4</sup>. One mother wrote that her son had been having two or three screaming tantrums per day after switching to failsafe eating and she was able to observe that his tantrums occurred 24 hours after eating preservatives. There are numerous reports of tantrum improvements, see [Reader stories](#) below.

### Which foods are most likely to cause tantrums?

Research with 86 behaviourally disordered children<sup>4</sup> found that:

75% reacted to salicylates (in fruit, mint, tomato etc flavoured products and in most fruit, some vegetables)

60-70% reacted to preservatives

55% reacted to artificial colour

40% reacted to MSG, synthetic antioxidants such as E320, natural glutamates, and biogenic amines

20% reacted to dairy foods

3% reacted to sugar used as a placebo

0% reacted to gluten but this rises to 20% for people with irritable bowel symptoms.

(Children with food intolerance often get better results with white flour than wholemeal.eg. white bread, rolled oats or rice based cereals such as Rice Bubbles).

For more information see [Introduction to food intolerance](#)

## Reader's stories

### From [930] One-liners (July 2010)

'Before the diet, I wouldn't have said my 2 yo had tantrums because his behaviour was more often than not terrible and constant - but I think I am seeing normal tantrums now'. by email, NSW

### From [637] One-liners (May 2008)

Preservatives seem to be responsible for my son's mega tantrums. Before I was aware of the impact of additives, he was having two or three screaming tantrums per day. Now we are failsafe, I have noticed his reactions are around 24 hours after eating preservatives - by email.

### From [474] One-liners (November 2006)

My two children have become angels on this diet - my 2 year old has stopped her temper tantrums and is sleeping better and my 5 yr old son is like a new boy, happily playing on his own for hours, drawing, building blocks. He realises that "food with colours and chemicals make me silly" - I can't believe he is actively trying to avoid those foods because he feels so much better!

### [888] 160b: Defiant, teary, mega tantrums after annatto (February 2010)

I have had great results with my daughter now 4 with a generally additive free, low chemical diet with improvements in behaviour, going to sleep etc (used to have many major tantrums, defiance, took 2 hours to go to sleep). 160b is a big culprit. It makes my daughter extremely defiant, teary and she throws mega tantrums. (It's so hard to educate my mum - as 160b is in so many "healthy foods" yoghurt, icecreams, etc). – Tamsin, Vic

### [448] 282: Identical twins react differently to bread preservative 282 (August 2006)

I am the mother of identical twin girls aged three and a half. I have discovered that one of my twin girls reacts violently to the preservative 282 in bread and since my girls were 18mths old have been purchasing bread through Baker Delight with great success. Recently for the first time in two years she was eating preservative bread on holiday and went off her head. Screaming, tantrums, the whole nine yards so to speak ... – by email.

### [364] Uncontrollable rages – 9 year old would constantly try to hurt himself (March 2005)

My 9 year old son started on the failsafe diet 3 months ago and his is teacher this year said it is like having a totally different child in the class. Before the diet it was impossible to live peacefully. He would have uncontrollable tantrums that would last hours where he would scream, cry, kick, headbang etc and we didn't know what would set him off. When he was going through these rages he would constantly try to hurt himself and kept screaming at me that he was no good, he was a bad boy and I'd be better off with another little boy - it broke my heart every time it happened. I think the longest both of us went without any sleep because of a 'rage' was three days.

The crunch came when he went off at school after lunch one day and it took me hours to calm him down and then time to pacify the school. We were both at our wits end. When I decided that we needed to go failsafe I totally cleaned out my pantry and freezer of everything that wasn't 'safe' and went shopping. My son has adapted really well to the new foods and never complains about it. Because I had no angry foods in the house neither of us looked for them and my son was content to eat what was available. He now sticks strictly to the diet and will

not eat anything unless he reads the label first and if he doesn't understand the label he says no because mum hasn't said he could have it and he doesn't know if it's 'safe'.  
I am so proud of him today. From a child who was on the verge of being expelled from Year 3 to a happy one in just over 3 months is amazing. It is a joy to get him from school each day as he always comes out skipping/running and grinning like a busted watermelon - no more tears. He has told me more than once he is feeling better now he is not so angry all the time. We are one very grateful household. – by email

### **From [399] ... on the tantrum roller coaster ...(March 2006)**

... When my son was two he was taken off the Neocate. Our paediatrician suggested a follow on formula that was cow's milk based but the protein was broken down into small chains. Within days the poor child was on the tantrum rollercoaster, throwing tantrums which generally lasted around half an hour at a time, where he'd hurt himself, belt into things, bash anyone who was around, and he'd have 6 to 8 of these a day. I was genuinely concerned that he was going to hurt himself or someone else. I rang the paediatrician (by now I was well and truly on a first name basis) and told him that I wasn't giving him any more of that formula ...

### **[378] Mr Revolting due to dairy (November 2005)**

Thanks for your Fed Up book which was recommended by the allergy clinic - we have been searching for years and getting nowhere but now it seems we have found a large part of the answer to our 6 year old son's behaviour problems. We are still working through the challenges, but to our surprise, the first challenge we did (dairy) was a definite FAIL! We almost didn't even eliminate dairy, because I was sure that was not a problem for him, however I decided to err on the side of caution and I'm glad I did! He became progressively grumpier, looked pale, seemed tired and complained of tummy aches. After a couple of months of beautiful behaviour and no tantrums, we were back to 'Mr Revolting'. We are now dairy free again, and it has taken about 10 days for him to get back to normal. - NSW

### **[861] Mega tantrums due to food (November 2009)**

I would just like to thank you for saving us from having to put my nearly 6 year old daughter on ADHD medication!! I was already known as the food nazi mum, my daughter wasn't allowed any preservatives, flavour enhancers or artificial colours, but all too often I was seeing behaviour that I knew was a reaction to additives - I just couldn't work out what!!! Life in our house was hell most of the time, and I was days away from taking her to our GP to get it sorted when a friend suggested reading Fed Up. I've looked at your website many times in the past but didn't know where to start - the idea of cutting more food seriously caused me so much anxiety that I just couldn't do it.

I only had to read a couple of pages to realize that my daughter's diet was REALLY high in foods naturally high in glutamates and bad antioxidants - I knew how badly she reacted to MSG, so I cut those foods right back (her lunchbox used to have a tasty cheese and Ourmate sandwich plus a little tub of cherry tomatoes, then a dinner of Nonna's tomato/mushroom pasta sauce!!) When ever we had take-aways I was fairly careful but it always consisted of hot chips, which I've now realised just how much that nasty antioxidant affected her ... the poor thing, I thought I was doing the right thing but I was just making it worse.

Our daughter has gone from throwing major tantrums over very small issues which used to result in her being locked in her room until she calmed down - mostly for our sanity because she was just wild, it could last anywhere from an hour to half a day sometimes!!!! She would disagree with everything, talk back, never do what we asked- including simple things like going to the toilet, so she used to constantly wet her pants instead, or she wouldn't get dressed for school- even though she absolutely loves going.

Before diet everything was a battle - I used to look at her and think if she was someone else's kid I would avoid spending time with that person because of how hard she made everything, so I of course have been carrying around a huge amount of guilt from having thoughts like that. I also couldn't work out why my 2 kids were so different, so I've spent a few years

blaming myself for this thinking it must have been something I did whilst I was pregnant or breastfeeding etc. Its been really hard, I've been on medication for anxiety for the past 6 months- surprising I didn't start taking something years ago considering how badly I felt I was coping with these issues!!!

Now we have an angel- the transformation is truly amazing!!! If she does misbehave it actually only takes a 1-2-3 and she usually does what needs to be done or said, the few time she has gone to time out, its been for her ten- tens (our timeout rule is she has to calmly breathe and count to ten, ten times- she can count to 100 now so its changed a bit- good counting practice lol) and then she comes out calmly and apologizes etc.

Over the last 5 weeks we have seen our daughter turn into a wild crazy thing twice, once was exactly 48 hours after eating hot chips twice in one day aaaghhh - we had to lock her in her room, she was OUT OF CONTROL!!!! The second time was after my mother in law took her to the royal show - Vegemite sandwiches, take-away chicken rolls, mini magnum icecreams. Again it was 48 hours after! I always used to think she reacted immediately, but I guess she had so much crap accumulate in her that it just seemed that way!!!

Anyway thank you again!!! After the last mega tantrum my husband was so amazed at the difference it has made he has decided to cut out lots of the bad foods he eats at work, he was also a child like her and figures it must be affecting him now in much the same way!! (He is quite the stubborn one that if I had suggested it there is no way he would have made the changes, hehehe!!!).

Oh and the whole family have switched to A2 milk, and I have now just realized how sick and bloated normal milk makes me feel!!! - Andrea, by email

See many more [reader's stories](#).

## The science

A group of 227 three-year olds from the Isle of Wight took part in a month long project by the UK Asthma and Allergy Research Centre. For two weeks the children drank a daily fruit juice dosed with 20mg of artificial colourings and 45mg of preservative, which are either equal to or below permitted levels. The additives tested were the artificial food colourings Tartrazine E102, Sunset Yellow E110, Carmoisine E122, Ponceau 4R E124, and the preservative Sodium Benzoate E211. All five were given at the same time in a single drink. For the other two weeks the children drank a fruit juice which was identical in appearance but without the additives. Parents filled in reports assessing their child's behaviour on criteria such as interrupting, fiddling with objects, disturbing others, difficulty settling down to sleep, concentration and temper tantrums. The report said the results showed the artificial food colourings and sodium benzoate preservative had 'substantial effects' on behaviour. The scientists concluded that significant changes in children's hyperactive behaviour<sup>2</sup>.  
<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-144483/Additives-make-children-behave-badly.html>.

As a result of this study and a follow up study with similar results by researchers from the UK's Southampton University<sup>3</sup>, the artificial colours mentioned above have since been banned in the UK. From July 21, 2010, foods containing these colours in the EU must carry a label warning 'May have an adverse effect on attention and behaviour in children'. However, in Australia there has been no official move to protect children from these colours.

Tantrums as a reaction to foods are a food intolerance reaction, not a food allergy<sup>5</sup>.

## Scientific references

1. Belden, AC, Thomson NR, Luby JL. Temper tantrums in healthy versus depressed and disruptive preschoolers: defining tantrum behaviors associated with clinical problems. J Pediatr. 2008;152(1):117-22.  
<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2211733/?tool=pubmed>

2. Bateman B, The effects of a double blind, placebo controlled, artificial food colourings and benzoate preservative challenge on hyperactivity in a general population sample of preschool children. Arch Dis Child. 2004;89(6):506-11. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-144483/Additives-make-children-behave-badly.html#ixzz0swySpl10>
3. McCann D and others, Food additives and hyperactive behaviour in 3-year-old and 8/9-year-old children in the community: a randomised, double-blinded, placebo-controlled trial. Lancet. 2007;370(9598):1560-7. Follow up to the trial above. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1719942/?tool=pubmed>
4. Swain A, Soutter V, Loblay R, Truswell AS. Salicylates, oligoantigenic diets, and behaviour. Lancet. 1985;2(8445):41-2.
5. Allen DH and others Adverse reactions to foods. Med J Aust. 1984;141(5 Suppl):S37-42.

### **More information**

[Fed Up by Sue Dengate](#), Random House

[Fed Up with Children's Behaviour DVD](#) by Sue Dengate

The RPAH Elimination Diet Handbook with food & shopping guide 2009 available from [www.allergy.net.au](http://www.allergy.net.au)

[Failsafe eating](#)

[www.fedup.com.au](http://www.fedup.com.au)

*The information given is not intended as medical advice. Always consult with your doctor for underlying illness. Before beginning dietary investigation, consult a dietician with an interest in food intolerance. You can find a supportive dietitian through the Dietitians Association of Australia [www.daa.asn.au](http://www.daa.asn.au) or write for our list of supportive dietitians ([confoodnet@ozemail.com.au](mailto:confoodnet@ozemail.com.au))*

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