What to say when your toddler melts down in the shop

"My two-year-old is screaming on the supermarket floor because I said no to sweets. Everyone is staring. What do I say right now?"

TAKE 1 · THE INSTINCT

"Stop it, everyone's looking! Okay, okay, one packet. Just stop."

TAKE 2 · TRY THIS INSTEAD

"You really want the sweets. The answer is no. I'm right here."

A meltdown in a shop has an audience, and the audience is what makes it so hard. The instinct is to end it fast: hiss at her to stop, then buy the sweets. The research on tantrums suggests the scene is shorter than it feels, and the deal makes the next one likelier.

What is known, and at what age

Researchers collected parents' accounts of tantrums from 335 children aged eighteen months to five years. The most common length was half a minute to a minute, and three in four were over within five minutes. Anger tended to rise fast and peak near the start, then fade, while crying and reaching for comfort built more slowly. It is a study of what parents reported, not a trial.

The NHS says tantrums often happen in shops, and gives plain advice: ignore the looks you get from people around you and concentrate on staying calm. It also says giving in will not help in the long term, and that offering sweets to stop a tantrum teaches a child that tantrums work.

The American Academy of Pediatrics suggests that if tantrums peak when your child is hungry, you carry a healthy snack when you are out.

What the words do

Take 1 speaks to the audience, not the child, and then pays her to stop. Take 2 is three short sentences: the feeling, the no, and the promise that you are not going anywhere. Then say little. Keep her safe, crouch near her if you can, and let the anger burn down. When it turns to crying, offer a hug. Then finish your shopping or leave, but leave without the sweets.

If you live in two homes

A child may melt down in the shop on the way to or from a changeover, when the day is already hard. Keep the same words and the same no. If the other home buys a treat at every shop, that is a conversation for the adults, directly, not something to settle in the aisle.

In the UK

The NHS temper tantrums page says tantrums often happen in shops, to ignore the looks from people around you and concentrate on staying calm, and that giving in will not help in the long term. If you are seriously concerned about your child's behaviour, talk to your health visitor or GP. In England and Wales, a child arrangements order may set out who a child lives with and when they spend time with each parent (older orders say "residence" and "contact"). Cafcass in England (Cafcass Cymru in Wales) advises the family court about what is safe for children; for everyday parenting questions, Coram Family Lives (0808 800 2222) is a free, confidential helpline. Nothing on this page is legal advice.

Sources

1. NHS (2022). Temper tantrums.
2. Potegal, M., Kosorok, M. R., & Davidson, R. J. (2003). Temper tantrums in young children: 2. Tantrum duration and temporal organization. Journal of Developmental & Behavioral Pediatrics, 24(3), 148–154.
3. American Academy of Pediatrics, HealthyChildren.org (2021). Top tips for surviving tantrums.
4. Cafcass (n.d.). About us. Retrieved November 9, 2026.
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7. Welsh Government (n.d.). Cafcass Cymru. Retrieved November 9, 2026.
8. Coram Family Lives (n.d.). Confidential helpline. Retrieved November 9, 2026.

This is general information drawn from published research and pediatric guidance. It is not medical, psychological or legal advice. If you are worried about your child, talk to your doctor.