What to say when your six-year-old melts down in a shop

"My six-year-old had a full meltdown in the toy shop when I said we were only looking. I thought we were past this. What do I say?"

TAKE 1 · THE INSTINCT

"You're six! You're embarrassing me. Stop it now or we're never coming here again."

TAKE 2 · TRY THIS INSTEAD

"You're so disappointed. We're not buying it today. Let's sit in the car until you feel ready."

A meltdown at six can feel like a step backwards, and in public it feels like a verdict on you. The instinct is to shame it out of him. The studies of tantrums after the toddler years suggest it is not as rare as it feels, and the NHS advice on shops still fits.

What is known, and at what age

In a study of 132 children, parents reported when tantrums started and stopped. About two-thirds began at two or three, and a little over half had stopped after five. That leaves many children still having the odd tantrum at six. The most common length, in nearly half the cases, was five to ten minutes.

In a study of 1,490 preschoolers, most children had tantrums sometimes, but daily tantrums were uncommon, about one in twelve. Tantrums in expectable moments, like hearing no in a toy shop, were the ordinary kind. The ones the researchers flagged as concerning were unpredictable, very long or destructive.

The NHS says tantrums often happen in shops, to ignore the looks and stay calm, and that giving in will not help in the long term: it teaches a child that tantrums work.

What the words do

Take 1 shames him for his age and makes a threat no one will keep. Take 2 names the feeling ("disappointed" is a bigger, truer word than "cross" at six), says the no plainly, and offers a way out of the audience: the car, until he is ready. You are not punishing him by leaving; you are giving the feeling somewhere quieter to land.

Next time, say the plan before you walk in, and keep the trip short.

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

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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.