What to say when your three-year-old has a tantrum

"My three-year-old is screaming on the floor over the wrong cup. Reasoning made it worse. What do I say while they're this angry?"

TAKE 1 · THE INSTINCT

"Okay. Let's look at the facts."

The instinct is to win the tantrum with logic: same water, different cup, let's look at the facts. The facts are not received.

Why a tantrum has two parts

Researchers collected parents' accounts of tantrums from 335 children aged eighteen months to five years and looked at how each one unfolded over time. Anger tended to rise quickly and peak near the start, then fade. Crying and reaching for comfort built more slowly and ran on past the anger. The two overlap; they are not neat halves, and no two tantrums are the same. The study describes a pattern in parents' reports. It is not a trial of anything.

The NHS guidance for under-fives fits that pattern. Shouting back will not end a tantrum. Holding and gently reassuring your child usually works when they are more upset than angry. The American Academy of Pediatrics gives the same order: wait for the tantrum to pass, then come back with comfort.

TAKE 2 · TRY THIS INSTEAD

"You really wanted the red cup. That's so frustrating."

What the words do

In the loud part, say little. Take 2 is two sentences, and that is the whole speech: "You really wanted the red cup" is a fact your child can agree with, and "That's so frustrating" gives the feeling a name. Then stay close, keep them safe, and leave space for the feeling to come out. Do not argue about the water.

When the screaming turns to crying, offer open arms: the NHS says holding and reassuring usually works when a child is more upset than angry. Holding is for comfort: if your child fights being held, let go and stay close enough to keep them safe. Once they are calm, the cup can be talked about, or washed, or forgotten.

If tantrums worry you, if your child hurts themselves or others, or if skills go backwards, talk to your pediatrician or GP. If anyone is in danger, contact emergency services. Hard night? In the US, call or text 988; in the UK, Samaritans, 116 123; elsewhere, findahelpline.com.

If you live in two homes

The cups will be different in each home and the tantrum may look much the same. Share one line with the other adult if you share anything: few words while it's loud, open arms when it turns to crying. You cannot run the other home's tantrums, and your own nights are where you can use this.

In the UK

The NHS temper tantrums page says the same thing in NHS words: shouting back will not end it, and holding and gently reassuring your child usually works when they're more upset than angry. 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 (England and Wales, 0808 800 2222) is free and confidential. Nothing on this page is legal advice.

Sources

1. 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.
2. Potegal, M., & Davidson, R. J. (2003). Temper tantrums in young children: 1. Behavioral composition. Journal of Developmental & Behavioral Pediatrics, 24(3), 140–147.
3. NHS (2022). Temper tantrums.
4. American Academy of Pediatrics, HealthyChildren.org (2021). Top tips for surviving tantrums.
5. Cafcass (n.d.). About us. Retrieved November 3, 2026.
6. UK Parliament (2014). Children and Families Act 2014, section 12: Child arrangements orders.
7. Department for Education (2014). The Children and Families Act 2014 (Transitional Provisions) Order 2014, SI 2014/1042, article 6.
8. Welsh Government (n.d.). Cafcass Cymru. Retrieved November 3, 2026.
9. SAMHSA (n.d.). 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline. Retrieved November 4, 2026.
10. Samaritans (n.d.). Contact us. Retrieved November 4, 2026.
11. Coram Family Lives (n.d.). Confidential helpline. Retrieved November 4, 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.