

32 Tantrum-Tamer Phrases to Use With 3 and 4 Year-Olds in Meltdown Mode

Use these phrases to increase cooperation and reduce the "Fournado!"

by: Andrea Nair

The trick to communicating successfully with three and four year-olds is to be clever, funny, clear, rested, and to have a method to calming yourself down [1] as fast as possible.

Children this age are often more aggressive and frustrated [2] than they were as toddlers, so being aware of this and meeting their challenging behavior with strategies and patience are very helpful for all involved.

In addition to trying the phrases I listed in my previous post for toddlers [3] and the ones below, please remember that children do better with a full attachment tank [4] and the use of positive discipline [5]. When a child feels important and is guided with limits, boundaries, a friendly tone and empathy, much of the reasons children blow up are eliminated.

Along with my suggestions, I have included helpful phrases that were contributed from parenting educator colleagues and parents from my Facebook page. [6]

When your child is trying to negotiate or beg:

1. "Asked and answered," or "You asked, and I already answered."
2. "You are upset that I won't give you another cookie. What is a good thing to do when we feel upset?" This puts the focus on managing their feelings and problem solving.

*If you feel your children aren't listening, consider how you can improve the delivery of your message [7]. Are you repeating? Nagging? Ending something fun? Not reasonable? Talking too much? Expecting more understanding than the child is capable of? These conditions often stop people from hearing you.

3. "What do you need to do in order to feel done?" - When your child is resisting instructions that it is time to go. Also this one...
4. "What can I help with so you feel ready to go?"

When tempers flare:

5. "I'm curious what happened here." (Instead of, "What did you do?!?")
6. "It is totally okay to feel angry—I would too. When you can, find some words to tell me so I can help you find an answer/get what you need." - Jenni P
7. "It is okay to be mad, but it is not okay to be mean."
8. "Calm first, talk second. Do you need help to calm down or can you do that on your own?"
9. "I see you are mad. It is not okay to hurt, break or throw." If the child continues to ramp up, you might try this: "Is this worth losing ____ over? I am here to help you calm down so you don't lose ____."

Use a consequence that is reasonable, age-appropriate and that the child has been forewarned about when everyone is calm. I strongly suggest that families make a *calm-down plan* so adults and children know what steps to follow when anger bubbles over. Use these elements in your plan:

- a) a key-word to remind you of your plan like "freeze" or "stop,"
- b) an action to let the "anger bubbles" come out like jumping 10 times, clapping your hands, count backwards from 11,
- c) remind yourself to breathe,
- d) ask yourself this question: what do I need?,
- e) then use your words to say what you need. This hopefully will lead into a problem solving discussion.

The family can agree that if the plan isn't used and hurting, breaking or throwing end up happening, then ____ will be the consequence. Reassure your child that you will help him/ her with the calm-down plan. This strategy works best when all members of the family use it.

Picky Eating:

10. "You do not need to eat, but you do need to sit at the table with the rest of the family." (takes the pressure off and 9 times out of 10, they eat!). – Sarah Remmer, RD^[8]
11. "What can we add to this food to make it super-tasty?" – Also from Sarah Remmer.

Sleep:

12. "Mommy and daddy feel so great because we were able to sleep because you did such a great job of staying in your bed all night long. Thank you so much!" They want to make us proud and contribute to our own well-being. It's important to let them know when they've done so. – [Alannah McGinn](#) [9]

13. "Sleep is where our body and brain grow! I can't wait to sleep tonight."

14. "Later, after I tuck you into bed, I can't wait to read my book and climb into my own cozy bed and sleep" from [this wonderful NY Times Motherlode piece](#) [10] by Heather Turgeon, co-author of [The Happy Sleeper](#) [11]

Frustration:

15. There are four steps/ phrases to handling frustration:

a. Show your child you see his or her upset (this helps your child feel important).

"You threw the car—I see you are upset."

Put a hand on your melting-down child and softly say, "I know, kiddo. I know."

b. Use a feelings word.

"Your brother took you car and now you look angry. Is that right?"

c. Pause, giving your child time to process these first two steps.

d. Help your child move into rational thought by asking a question that focuses on problem solving or to find some words to explain.

"Do you need a 1) Break, 2) To try again, or 3) Help?"

When your child is **FRUSTRATED**, empathize and problem solve with these steps:

1) **See it.** "I see you are frustrated. Is the zipper not closing?"

2) **Feel it.** "You look angry. Is that right?"

3) **Pause.** Wait for your child to say his piece.

4) **Consider options.** I recommend this mantra:

"Do you need...
A break?
To try again?
Some help?"

Make sure not to skip the first two steps!

We often try to rescue our kids before the emotions can get processed.

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When/ thens ^[12](or after/ then, first/ then) can also be used in many situations:

16. "When your hands are clean, then I know you are ready to eat."
17. "After tidy time, we can certainly start a new puzzle."
18. "First we brush our teeth, then we can get the LEGO out."
19. I try to set expectations, situations or transitions for my four-year-old. I usually say, "_____ first, _____ second" and I try to make the second thing something he wants. ex: "dinner first, dessert second." -Jamie W

To diffuse a power struggle:

20. "Can I help you _____?" It puts them in the place of power. We're just there to help. This has really encouraged cooperating in my 3-4 year olds. You could even add, "I love working with you" or "can you show me what to do/how to do it?" -Andy Smithson, MSW from [Tru Parenting](#) ^[13]
21. "Are you going to put the puzzle away now or after you wash your hands?"
22. "Shoes." "Potty." "Teeth." One-word cues instead of lecture. –Lisa P-W
23. "Do you have a way you want to do this?" is one of my favorites. Gives the child a chance to take the lead and taps into their inner motivation and problem solving skills. I have a post that is similar here! (post) -Ariadne Brill from [Positive Parenting Connection](#) ^[14]
24. "It's out-the-door ^[15] time. Are you coming to the mudroom on your hands or feet?" (Try walking on your hands)
25. "I also used to have a hard time doing XYZ when I was your age—is there anything I can do to help you?" –[Rivka](#) ^[16] [Caroline](#) ^[16]
26. "Who is brushing your teeth? Mommy or Daddy?" (Pick Daddy, pick Daddy.)
27. Say you're looking for an expert on road safety, shoelace tying, hand washing. Act like you've forgotten how. They'll soon take charge and show you what to do -Amy P

Whining/ demanding:

28. "I can hear you're frustration, but can't hear what you need. Try again, I'm listening."
-Brandie H

29. "I'll be able to hear you when you use your regular talking voice."

30. My 4.5 yo can ask for something quite rudely so I calmly say to him "Ask me again in a kinder way" which allows him to practice his manners without feeling like he's being reprimanded. Also if he whines or only uses one word, I'll say to him "Can you repeat that in a sentence that I can understand?" -Jill T

31. "Thank you, mama", "Please, mama" after they have demanded something, as a reminder of a kinder way of using language. No shaming or judgment: I just would say what I wanted to hear, how I wanted to hear it. They would repeat it back to me and we would move on. Or they wouldn't, and we would still move on - Casey O'Roarty of Joyful Courage [17]

32. One of my favorites: "Can I get a Yes, Mama!?" I always say it in a playful way and usually get an exuberant, and affirmative, response back. If there's a little bit of tension, this seems to help break it. Also, when I ask Cee to do something, I ask in a genuinely respectful way that shows how much I value her help. "Cee, I could really use your help. Would you mind giving me a hand with setting the table?" And then "Thanks SO much for being such a helper today. I don't know what I would do without you." I have a newborn, and I'm really asking for a lot of help from my 4-year-old right now, and she's almost always willing to help when she feels truly valued. - Alice Callahan, PhD from Science of Mom [18]