

## I'll scream and scream! Coping with your toddler's tantrums

ALFIE IS a sweet toddler with a cherubic smile, but sometimes, just sometimes, he loses the plot. Last year, on a flight to France, he threw the mother of all hissy fits. As the plane came down to land, Alfie refused to put his seatbelt on. "It started as a bit of straightforward moodiness, but he soon worked himself into an absolute frenzy," says his mother, Anna Linehan. "He was screaming the plane down: 'Mummy, don't strap me in. DON'T STRAP ME IN!' It was awful, total hysteria." Tantrums usually start after a child's second birthday – hence the term "the terrible twos". At this age, children are becoming more independent and beginning to think about what they want – and don't want – to do. "But they haven't yet developed much in the way of language skills, so a tantrum is one way of trying to communicate," says Dr Judith Hutchings, a clinical child psychologist with the NHS. "Most children stop throwing tantrums once they've learnt that you can instead say, 'No, I really don't want to do that'."

However, tantrums are, as Dr Hutchings says: "An early type of anti-social behaviour. If they become very established and severe, there are plenty of studies showing that, if not dealt with, they predict a strong likelihood of later difficulties, not only in adolescence, but going into adulthood." So how do you prevent your toddler from potentially having behaviour problems later in life? Experienced parents know that prevention is easier than a cure. Luckily, tantrums are like storms: you can see the thunderclouds building before the storm breaks. Distracting a child – with a toy, food, or even something wildly fascinating you've just spotted outside the window – is often all it takes. The National Society of the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) advises avoiding the word "no", and saying "later" or "soon" instead. Giving orders and ultimatums is also a bad idea: they're like a red rag to a two-year old. But sometimes you fail to read the warning signs and before you know it, the tantrum is in full swing and half the supermarket is staring at you. Your stress is at a critical level, and all you want to do is yell. But that would be wrong, according to parenting coach Emma Harrington. "The most important thing to do in this situation is ignore the tantrum," she says. "React in any way to a tantruming child, and they work out that this is a good way to get your attention. Plus, the tantrums will last longer and longer, as the child knows that you will eventually give in." After your child has (finally) calmed down, it's worth finding out what the cause was, so that you can help them find a better way of coping. "From the child's point of view, a tantrum is not a very effective way of handling a bad situation, because it can cause parents to behave unpredictably," says Dr Hutchings, such as with a reaction of shouting or smacking. But neither is a good idea. "Toddlers aren't able to connect their parents' anger with their own behaviour, so punishing them doesn't work," says Eileen Hayes, an NSPCC parental advisor. "Instead, change the situation. For example if a toddler constantly wants to play with something dangerous or valuable, move it out of sight." Interestingly, researchers have found that adolescent brains go through a similar sort of re-wiring as those of a three-year old, which might explain the similarity between teenage sulks and toddler tantrums. So you can always comfort yourself with the thought that your two-year old's hissy fits are just nature's way of preparing you for the teenage years.