

How should I handle my child's public meltdown over screen time?

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Taking away screens can trigger meltdowns in children at home and in public. For some parents, this can be a daily struggle.

To understand why this happens and how parents can respond, The Straits Times spoke to psychiatrist Lim Boon Leng and early childhood leaders Alicia Yah, education head at Presbyterian Preschool Services, and Coreen Soh, chief child development and support officer at NTUC First Campus.

Q Why does my child throw a tantrum when I take away the phone?

A Shows are designed to stimulate and activate the brain's reward centre, triggering the release of dopamine and giving the child a sense of pleasure. When parents take away the screen, the child experiences a drop in dopamine levels, which leads them to react in a negative way, said Dr Lim, who runs psychiatric clinic Dr BL Lim Centre for Psychological Wellness.

He added that if someone takes an adult's device away, the adult can protest verbally, but a child might not be able to express this. Children's prefrontal cortex – the part of the brain responsible for self-control and emotional regulation – is also still developing, so it is

very difficult for them to manage sudden disappointment or frustration, Dr Lim said.

Hence, some react with an emotional outburst, or by withdrawing.

Q How can parents prevent tantrums over screen time?

A Experts said setting clear boundaries and rules around screen time is crucial, as children cope better when expectations are predictable and consistently enforced.

Dr Lim said that when parents are inconsistent with the rules – such as occasionally giving in to the child during tantrums – it can reinforce the tantrum behaviour, similar to how unpredictable rewards can encourage gambling.

“Positive reinforcement perpetuates behaviour, and random positive reinforcement perpetuates behaviour even more,” he said.

Parents can set up a routine, for instance, allowing half an hour of screen time before dinner every day.

Timers or visual cues can help signal the end of screen time. For example, telling children to stop when a timer rings or when the long hand of the clock reaches three.

Visual cues are particularly suited for young children as they struggle to grasp the abstract concept of time, Ms Soh noted.

The parent and child should also agree on when to stop screen time,

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such as when a game level or episode ends. “Children go into tantrums when they feel that the plan has changed without their consent, is not what was agreed upon, or if they don't feel like they were given a fair deal,” said Ms Soh.

Q What should parents do when a child throws a tantrum in public over screen time?

A Some parents feel children throw tantrums in public to embarrass them.

Ms Soh said parents should understand that children are testing boundaries, not challenging their parents' authority.

She explained that if parents view such behaviour as a “power struggle” and respond by asserting dominance, the focus shifts to “winning” instead of helping the child to learn from the incident.

She said parents should stay calm and avoid shaming or scolding the child in public.

Mrs Yah agreed: “The calmer you are, the faster the child will calm down.”

If possible, parents can move the child to a quieter place and watch the child have a meltdown.

Experts warn against giving the device back simply to stop the crying, as this would condition children to throw a tantrum in order to get screen time.

“They should always see tantrums as an outlet of negative emotions, and not a tool they can use to get what they want,” said Mrs Yah.

Ms Jessica Chan, 37, said her two boys, aged seven and nine, tend to ask for more time when their time limit is up and the iPad is taken away, and would sometimes cry.

She said that when she remains firm, they would eventually realise that crying does not bring the screen back. This stops the tears, and they would then move on to other activities.

“You have to be firm, and just let them deal with their emotions. After five or 10 minutes, it will pass; they will get that they won't get (screen) time any more. But if you relent, then it's going to get harder each time you want to stop them from watching (the screen).”

Q How can parents acknowledge their child's emotions during a meltdown without giving in?

A Ms Soh said parents should acknowledge how the child feels be-

fore explaining the boundaries. For instance, if the meltdown happens at a wedding dinner, they can say, “I understand that this was a long dinner and past your bedtime.”

The parent could also offer to cuddle the child or ask, “What can I do to make you more comfortable?”

Mrs Yah said parents can empathise with the child while staying firm and reminding them of the boundaries by saying, “I understand that it can be hard and upsetting when something you like is taken away from you. Remember, we agreed to stop when the alarm rings and we will need to keep to it.”

Ultimately, children want to feel heard and understood, she added.

Q How can parents help their child develop self-control?

A Mrs Yah said parents can guide children to recognise their emotions. Younger children may first need help naming what they feel, such as anger or sadness, before learning how to manage those feelings, she added.

Parents can also involve their children in thinking about solutions by asking them, “What do you think I can do the next time this happens so that you do not feel upset?”

Dr Lim suggested involving children in deciding the rules around screen time, such as being allowed

to finish watching a show before stopping.

“Having them participate in formulating the boundaries and the rules... they are more likely to comply,” he said.

Ms Soh added that parents can also involve children in choosing alternatives to screen time to take along when they leave home, such as toys, books or drawing materials.

Explaining why excessive screen time is harmful, such as how it may affect eyesight, can also help children learn to take charge of their own choices, she said.

QUICK RECAP

Tantrums over screen time are normal among younger children whose brains are still developing the ability for self-control and emotional regulation. Being firm and consistent with boundaries helps children know what to expect and learn to respect the rules.

When children have a meltdown in public over screen time, parents should remain calm, and avoid giving the device back to stop the tantrum. When the child has calmed down, parents can initiate a conversation to acknowledge the child's emotions while guiding the child to reflect on the incident and reaffirming the boundaries.

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