

Toddler head banging: why it happens and how to respond.

Research suggests that up to 15% of young children will intentionally bang their head on the wall or floor at some point. Head banging often occurs during tantrums, but it can also happen at bedtime when children are trying to fall asleep.

Generally, children stop banging their heads before it becomes too painful. But that doesn't make it any easier to watch.

Why do toddlers bang their heads?

Your toddler experiences all the same feelings as you, but they don't yet have the skills to regulate those feelings. This is because their prefrontal cortex—the part of their brain responsible for managing emotions—just isn't well developed yet.

Your toddler also doesn't have the vocabulary to express their strong feelings, so pent-up emotion can come out in a physical behaviour, like head banging.

There are several possible reasons why young children engage in head banging behaviour. Here are some common examples:

- Baby head banging is a common self-soothing technique at naptime or bedtime. Infants are used to being rocked to sleep, so many infants and toddlers find ways to create a repetitive motion themselves—often with head butting or banging their heads against a surface.
- Children who are under-stimulated because of sensory deficits, such as those who are blind or deaf, often engage in head banging for stimulation.
- Likewise, children whose environment offers little distraction may become bored or lonely and thus bang their heads for stimulation.
- Children who are overwhelmed by a busy, loud, restless environment are also soothed by rhythmic movements such as head banging.
- Some children head-bang for relief when they are teething or have an ear infection.
- A baby may bang his head out of frustration or anger, as in a temper tantrum, is also common.
- Some children engage in head banging as an effective attention-seeking activity. The more reaction children get from parents or other adults, the more likely they are to continue this habit.

In general, children do not head-bang in order to injure themselves.

How to handle toddler head banging

Seeing your toddler bang their head can be really upsetting. It's natural to want to try and stop it immediately, but try to take a moment to calm yourself first. A dramatic response, like yelling or hurrying to scoop them up, may only add to their distress.

Ensure your child is safe

The majority of toddler head-banging episodes don't result in serious injury. Just in case, look around the area to ensure there's nothing sharp or dangerous that might injure your child. Consider slipping a small blanket or pillow under their head.

Watch for signs of a tantrum

Head banging can't always be prevented before it starts, but you may be able to pick up on cues that your child is getting very upset. For example, they may raise their voice, rock back-and-forth, or tense their body. If your child is prone to head banging, this is a good moment to calmly intervene.

Support them with empathy

Your toddler learns how to manage their strong emotions by watching you and their other caregivers. Model a calm and empathetic response to teach your toddler emotion regulation skills. [Giving them the vocabulary to express their emotions](#) is one strategy that can make a big difference. Validate their feelings to help them learn how to put their emotions into words: "You're so mad about leaving the park. It's [hard to leave](#) when you're having fun."

Use distraction

When you notice head banging, try introducing a distraction. By decreasing the amount of time spent on the activity, it will be outgrown faster.

If head banging is part of a tantrum, calmly distract your child but do not give him the object/activity he threw the tantrum to get. If you give him/her the desired object/activity, you are teaching your child that throwing a tantrum is a sure way to get whatever he/she wants.

When to worry about toddler head banging

Once a toddler develops other ways of coping with their strong emotions, head banging usually subsides. If your toddler's head banging persists, causes injury, or prevents them from sleeping, reach out to medical professionals for advice.