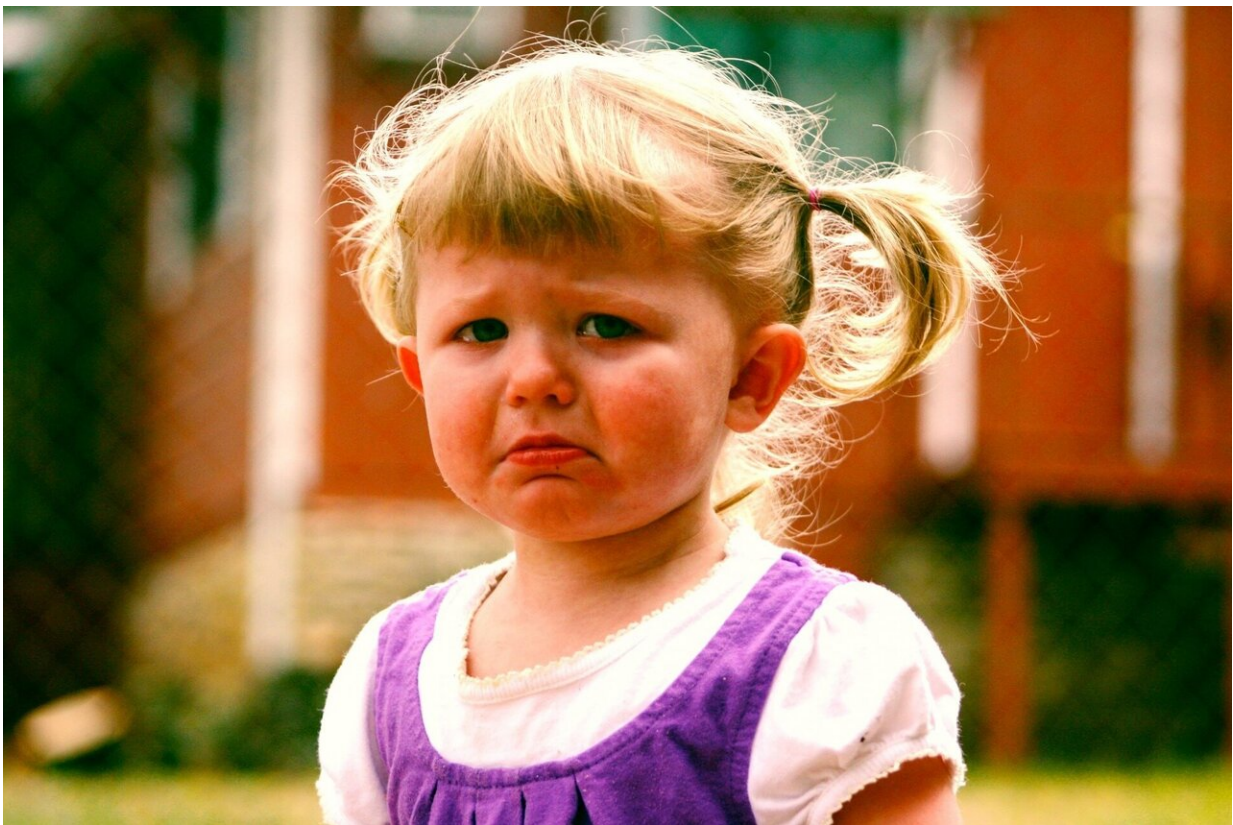


Kids given 'digital pacifiers' to calm tantrums fail to learn how to regulate emotions, study finds

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Tantrums are part of growing up. How these outbursts of anger or frustration are managed, however, can impact children's emotional

development.

An international team of researchers has investigated how giving children digital devices acting as "digital pacifiers" to avoid or manage tantrums impacts children's later anger management skills. They found that children who were routinely given digital devices when they threw a tantrum had more difficulties regulating their emotions. The researchers also stressed the importance of letting children experience negative emotions and the crucial role parents play in the process.

Children learn much about [self-regulation](#)—that is, affective, mental, and behavioral responses to certain situations—during their first few years of life. Some of these behaviors are about children's ability to choose a deliberate response over an automatic one. This is known as effortful control, which is learned from the environment, first and foremost through children's relationship with their parents.

In recent years, giving children digital devices to control their responses to emotions, especially if they're negative, has become common. Now, a team of researchers in Hungary and Canada has investigated whether this strategy, referred to as parental digital emotion regulation, leads to the inability of children to effectively regulate their emotions later in life. The results appear in *Frontiers in Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*.

"Here we show that if parents regularly offer a digital device to their child to calm them or to stop a tantrum, the child won't learn to regulate their emotions," said Dr. Veronika Konok, the study's first author and a researcher at Eötvös Loránd University. "This leads to more severe emotion-regulation problems, specifically, anger management problems, later in life."

More devices, less control

"We frequently see that parents use tablets or smartphones to divert the child's attention when the child is upset. Children are fascinated by [digital content](#), so this is an easy way to stop tantrums and it is very effective in the short term," explained Prof. Caroline Fitzpatrick, a researcher at the Université de Sherbrooke and senior author of the study. However, the researchers expected that in the long run, the practice has little benefit. To confirm their thesis, they carried out an assessment in 2020 and a follow-up one year later. More than 300 parents of children aged between two and five years old completed a questionnaire that assessed child and parent media use.

They found that when parents used digital emotion regulation more often, children showed poorer anger and frustration management skills a year later. Children who were given devices more often as they experienced negative emotions also showed less effortful control at the follow-up assessment.

"Tantrums cannot be cured by digital devices," Konok pointed out. "Children have to learn how to manage their [negative emotions](#) for themselves. They need the help of their parents during this [learning process](#), not the help of a digital device."

Helping parents support children

The researchers also found that poorer baseline anger management skills meant that children were given digital devices more often as a management tool. "It's not surprising that parents more frequently apply digital emotion regulation if their child has emotion regulation problems, but our results highlight that this strategy can lead to the escalation of a pre-existing issue," Konok said.

It is important not to avoid situations that could be frustrating to the [child](#), the researchers pointed out. Instead, it is recommended that

parents coach their children through difficult situations, help them recognize their emotions, and teach them to handle them.

To equip parents of children with anger management problems for success, it is important that they receive support, the researchers said. For example, [health professionals](#) working with families could provide information on how parents can help their children manage their emotions without giving them tablets or smartphones.

"Based on our results, new training and counseling methods could be developed for parents. If people's awareness about digital devices being inappropriate tools for curing tantrums increases, [children's](#) mental health and well-being will profit," Fitzpatrick concluded.

More information: Cure for tantrums? Longitudinal associations between parental digital emotion regulation and children's self-regulatory skills, *Frontiers in Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* (2024). [DOI: 10.3389/frcha.2024.1276154](#)

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