



Dealing with Tantrums

Almost all parents have dealt with temper tantrums in their children. They are nearly universal and almost always frustrating. What can a parent do?

The first step in dealing with tantrums is understanding what the child is trying to communicate. Children have tantrums because their needs are not being met, because they don't know any other way of getting your attention, or because they are overwhelmed. When we take time to see the world from the child's perspective, we can be more helpful.

For example, a child may fight getting ready for school because he is afraid of school. A child may throw a fit because no one notices him unless he does. Or a child may scream and cry in the store because that's how she has consistently gotten what she wanted.

It is often hard for adults to understand a child's perspective. Adults commonly apply adult motives to children's behavior. For example, infants may be called manipulators or show-offs; yet they are not normally manipulators, unless they have learned that manipulation is the only way to get their needs met. Likewise, children are not normally show-offs unless they learn by experience that they must act up in order to get attention. It is better to think of the message children are trying to communicate to us rather than try to play psychologist with their motives.

Parents may be unaware of stresses and disappointments in their children's lives. Are they feeling picked on by older siblings or displaced by younger siblings? Is there a lot of stress in the family? Understanding the child's life is good preparation for helping children.

So, how can parents prevent and deal with tantrums? The single most important thing parents can do is respond to their children promptly and sensitively. Many tantrums are a child's expression of frustration: "Will someone please notice me? Will someone take an interest in my life and help me with my needs?"

A father once asked me how he should deal with his toddler who tugged on his pant leg and whined every evening. He told me that he usually ignored the boy because he did not want to encourage whining. I suggested that the father take a different course. I think the little boy wanted his dad to talk with him, take a walk with him, play with him. I encouraged the dad to go right to his son when he got home from work and initiate some activity.

Normally, an infant cries because of tiredness, hunger, or some other discomfort. When we respond promptly and sensitively to their needs, children are less likely to have tantrums.

Parents can also help their children by setting reasonable limits. For example, if a child whines at the dinner table, a parent can say, "You have the right to be unhappy. We have the right to a peaceful dinner. If you need some time for crying, you are welcome to use your bedroom. We hope you will soon be ready to rejoin us." The objective is not to punish the child but to give him or her a chance to deal with feelings while, at the same time, respecting the needs of the family.

If a child frequently has problems with whining at dinner time, maybe the child needs an afternoon snack or a nap or some engaging activity. Many problems can be prevented if we recognize children's needs and help meet them in sensitive ways.

One of the great tantrum traps is failing to enforce reasonable rules. One father took his boy to a movie. As they passed some video games at the theater, the boy begged to play. The father refused. The boy threw a fit. The father quickly pulled out the quarters and fed the machine to placate his son. The father sheepishly commented that it was easier to provide the quarters than to fight with his son.

But it is harder in the long run. If our children learn that tantrums get them what they want, they may become efficient terrorists. The father might have done several things differently. When his son asked if he could play a videogame, the father needed to consider whether it was appropriate. Did they have the time? Was the game appropriate for his son? If he decided that playing the game was acceptable, there was no problem.

If, for any reason, the father decided that it was not appropriate to play that game at that time, he could acknowledge his son's interest while stating the limit. "It would be fun to play but we need to get our seat in the theater now." If the son threw a tantrum, the father could wait patiently or merely invite his son forward, "Son, I am ready to go to the movie. Will you join me?"

The good news about tantrums is that they usually are part of a child's life for a fairly short time. We can help children move toward healthy maturity by responding sensitively to their needs and setting reasonable limits.