

Temper-Tantrum Troubles

“Temper tantrums are an emotional display. The child may feel angry or frustrated or vindictive—or even playful. We are most effective when we deal with the tantrum and then later deal with the feeling behind the tantrum.”

—Dr. Jane Nelsen

What is a temper tantrum? If you have to ask that question, you’ve never seen a child completely lose it and throw a tantrum. Tantrums normally occur between the ages of two and four, but they can happen at later ages as well. A tantrum is a child’s way of saying, “I am not



getting my way, and I am very, very, very upset about it, and I want to make sure you and everyone within hearing distance knows it!” Children may throw themselves on the floor or against a wall, flail their arms and legs, cry, scream, and do anything to draw attention to themselves.

Tantrums say two things: (1) The child is obviously upset because he or she is frustrated, and (2) at that particular moment, this is the best way the child knows of dealing with the situation.

It is very easy for parents to lose their tempers when dealing with tantrums, especially when they occur in public. This is a very embarrassing situation for the parents. While the child is screaming and rolling around on the ground, the parent imagines that everyone around is saying, “Oh, can’t that parent control her child?” or “That child is going to hurt himself. Why doesn’t the father do something?” In public situations, parents feel like crawling into a hole and pulling the hole in after them.

1. The Problem

Brian and his mother are at the mall. It is the end of a long day of shopping, and both of them are tired. All of a sudden, Brian stops dead in his tracks. His mother turns and asks, “What is the matter?” Brian says, “I want to go home.” His mother explains that she has only one more stop, and then it will be time to go home. Brian, however, will have none of that explanation. He screams and throws himself to the ground, kicking and flailing his arms. To the mother, it seems like time has stopped and everyone in the mall is staring at them. What should the mother do?

2. Problem Analysis

Children believe that throwing a tantrum is the best way to deal with a frustrating situation. They are not getting their needs met. In the above situation, the child is saying with the tantrum, "I am tired, and I want to go home and play. Mom says I can't, so at least I am going to show her how mad I am and get some attention at the same time." If the child gets his needs met through tantrums (with parental attention), it is very likely that the tantrums will continue. Therefore, it is the parent's job to make sure that temper tantrums are not need fulfilling experiences for the child. In other words, don't give in.

3. Rules and Outcomes

Rules are not appropriate here. Simply having a rule that tantrums are not acceptable behavior is not an effective way to prevent them.

4. Solutions

Dealing with a temper tantrum has two parts: (1) You have to deal with the tantrum itself, and (2) you have to deal with the feelings that were behind the tantrum.

One way to deal with the tantrum is to just ignore it. Of course, this is a lot easier at home than at the mall. It is, however, the best solution. Just stand by quietly, and wait until it is over. This is the time to teach your child that a tantrum is not the way to get the attention that he wants. Simply walk away from the child, leave him alone, or put him in his room. If the child is being destructive or dangerous to himself or others, put him in his room, or carry him out of the mall and put him in the car, or take him to a restroom, or take him outside. You have to let the tantrum run its course without giving in and rushing to console the child.

Also, don't bother trying to reason with or explain something to the child. The child is in an extremely emotional state and definitely not in the part of the brain that reasoning will reach. If you attempt to talk with the child, it will give him the attention that he is looking for, and the tantrum will continue. Also, don't lose your temper and throw a tantrum yourself. This will only encourage your child to keep the tantrum going. And remember that you are attempting to deal with the child's behavior. It is the child's behavior that is unwanted, not the child. Don't belittle the child and make him feel unloved or unwanted just because the behavior was.

After the tantrum is over, and both you and your child have calmed down, it is time to talk about the behavior. The parent could say to Brian, "I know that you were tired and really wanted to go home, and you were

really upset when I said we had one more stop to make. It's okay to be upset. It happens to all of us. I'm here to help you, and I love you."

Another way to handle a temper tantrum is to give the child an alternative way to show his anger. Some parents find that giving a child a piece of paper and crayon and asking them to draw a picture about how they feel is effective. One parent reported that the child took the paper and immediately began to draw angry faces. The parent said, "Boy you are really angry" and encouraged the child to draw more pictures. Soon the child quieted down, pleased that he was able to show how he felt.

5. Proactivity: Preventing Future Problems

You can teach a child how to handle frustration and anger by modeling. Show your child that there are other ways of dealing with a problem besides yelling and screaming. When you lose your temper in front of children, you are teaching them that this is an acceptable form of behavior. Even worse, if you rant and rave and throw things when you are upset, don't be surprised when your child starts acting the same way. If you are with your child and find yourself in a situation that is about to make you very upset, tell the child about it. For example: "Honey, I am really upset with this traffic. I am going to pull over to the curb and sit quietly for a moment so I can calm down." Talking with children about feelings lets them know that it is okay to be upset, but that there are ways do deal with anger besides emotional displays.

Some experts recommend that parents talk with the child about what they should do if a tantrum occurs. They suggest questions like "Would you like a hug?"; "Would you like me to wait until it is over?"; or "Would you like me to take you to a quiet place until you calm down?" I agree that involving children in the solution is good. However, I would be careful with this approach. If the child perceives that he is able to manipulate your behavior with a tantrum, this is not going to have a positive effect.

I believe that a better approach would be to tell the child what you will do when a tantrum occurs. For example, you could say that you will ask the child to stop; if the tantrum continues, you will leave the child alone to calm down. When the child settles down, you will come and talk with him. Whatever you decide to do, be sure to follow through with caring and respect.

I mentioned that tantrums can happen even as children grow older. They occur when children see no other alternative way to express their feelings. I remember a time when my son tore his favorite sweater and

simply turned and put his fist through the wall in the den. He was a little older than two; he was twenty-four (years, not months). A couple of days later, I asked him why he acted that way. He responded, "It seemed like a good idea at the time." I guess that is a pretty good explanation of why children choose temper tantrums.