



Lucy Daniels

Center for Early Childhood

Helping children live emotionally healthy lives

Managing Tantrums by Putting Children in Their Room

Some parents have found that they can help shorten their child's fit by putting him or her in their room. They sometimes wonder if this is a good idea or not. We want to offer some guidance about this aspect of managing tantrums as well as about some related matters.

Two types of outbursts: Children having fits are upset, demanding, crying or angry and beyond reasoning with. It is important to distinguish between two types of fits. The first is the true temper tantrum. Children experiencing temper tantrums are not only angry and unreasonable; they also have become completely overwhelmed by their own reactions. They are no longer able to control themselves.

The second type of fit is a rage reaction. Children having rage reactions are also furious and may act outrageously, but they still have some control over their behavior. They are not overwhelmed by their own reactions.

Children in the midst of a rage reaction are very upset, but merely upset. Children having a temper tantrum are much more than upset. They are terrified, having lost the ability to control their mind and body. Furthermore, children having a tantrum experience seem to change in their feelings about themselves and others. They feel panicked and abandoned. Their parents often seem to be their enemy rather than their protector, a terrifying experience in its own right.

Parents sometimes can easily distinguish between temper tantrums and rage states, but other times it is difficult to determine whether a child really has "lost it" or not.

Parents should rely upon their own knowledge of their child to determine whether she or he has crossed the boundary from a rage reaction into a temper tantrum. If parents find themselves unsure, we recommend that they err on the side of assuming that their child is indeed overwhelmed and experiencing a temper tantrum. Generally, the younger the child, the more likely it is that he or she is experiencing a tantrum.

Our guidance for responding to a fit depends on whether parents believe their child is having a temper tantrum or rage reaction.

Discipline goals: The Lucy Daniels Center believes that discipline should help children control their behavior on the basis of an inner sense of right and wrong and be motivated by kindness, compassion, empathy and connection with others. Although children's behavior can sometimes be changed rapidly through excessive rewards or harsh punishment, we are concerned that these approaches steer children to make moral choices on the basis of how the external world responds, a problematic basis for moral action.

Responding to a tantrum: Children in the midst of the internal tornado of a temper tantrum should not be isolated. They are already terrified and feeling utterly alone — however self-imposed. Isolation adds insult to injury.

It is true that some children will gain control over a temper tantrum more quickly if they are isolated. However, we believe this often occurs because they are terrorized by the isolation and, out of desperation, pull themselves together. Achieving behavioral stabilization on the basis of extreme fear can result in painful memories that may adversely affect relationships, self-esteem and behavior.

Parents can respond most helpfully to temper tantrums by remaining as close as their child will allow, waiting it out, and then providing loving assistance to her or him the rest of the day. Although the tantrum may have been set off by the child's own behavior or reaction to a limit, parents should understand that once the temper tantrum begins, her or his original misbehavior is not nearly as important as helping with the recovering from the deep hole she or

he has descended into.

After a few hours parents can return to the original problem and discuss other ways that their child could have handled the situation so that she or he would not have had to go through so much upset. Consequences are not helpful and, in fact, can be excessively punitive for temper tantrums; no child chooses a temper tantrum, they become caught up in it.

Responding to a rage attack: We have different guidance for children undergoing rage attacks. These children are misbehaving, could control themselves if they rose to the occasion, and therefore will learn from consequences related to discipline.

Consequences can take many forms. One approach might be to wait out the rage attack and, after the child has settled down a bit, withdraw some privilege. It would be helpful to let the child know that Mommy or Daddy realizes it is difficult to regain control at a time of upset, but parents expect him to do so and can help her or him find ways to do this.

It may be reasonable to put children experiencing rage reactions in their rooms if they are 4 years or older. Younger children will be frightened excessively by such treatment. However, we would only recommend such a discipline if parents believe that their child would not experience this temporary isolation in an anxious way on the basis of their knowledge of their child. Controlling a child with anxiety, physical threat or pain (corporal punishment), or shame is always counterproductive in the long run.

Working together: Of course, parents face their own challenges when dealing with fits. Parents may feel helpless and angry that their child has fallen into such a state, or even embarrassed if the fit occurs in public. If parents ever feel — like many parents do — pushed to their own emotional limits, it is reasonable to isolate a child for a moment so that the parent can regroup.

The most important thing to remember is that there are reasons a child is having difficulty working out the situation that leads either to a rage attack or temper tantrum. Parents can be most helpful by assisting their child to

avoid rage reactions or temper tantrums. Children do not wish to have rage attacks and especially do not welcome temper tantrums.

Parents can discuss with their child their awareness that she or he, too, would like to find other ways to handle these situations. Parents can do what they can to help a child plan alternatives to rage and tantrums. Children, particularly young children, are unlikely to take up such a parental offer to any significant extent. However, parents will lay the groundwork for a collaborative approach that will be the best way parents and child can work together over time on behalf of a child's moral development.