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Helping children live emotionally healthy lives

### **Responding to Temper Tantrums**

We will first review our description of the causes of temper tantrums and children's emotional states during tantrums that we have described in more detail in another article, "Preventing Temper Tantrums." Understanding how best to respond to temper tantrums requires a prior understanding about how children experience the events we call temper tantrums.

**What is a temper tantrum?:** Temper tantrums may occur when a child is both extremely angry and also temporarily loses some emotional competencies and controls, such as the ability to make judgments, tolerate frustrations and control impulses. Such a temporary loss of mental abilities is called regression.

Tantrums reduce children's confidence in their capacity to be the masters of their bodies and emotions because they feel helplessly unable to control themselves. Furthermore, children experience frightening feelings and ideas. A typical and particularly distressing internal event involves a change in children's sense of their parents' benevolence. Children may lose their images of their parents as helpful figures to such an extent that they briefly feel that their parents are even dangerous. Children's frantic cries of "leave me alone," "don't hurt me," or "I hate you," express how children feel in the midst of regressions in which their rage is felt not only as their own, but flows onto their images of parents who are then also felt to be destructively angry.

Children are terrified when they are angry with and afraid of the people that they love and depend upon most. Children feel desperately alone at these times, stuck with uncontrollable feelings, convinced on the basis of their own

feelings that they have been abandoned by their helping parents. Children descend into a very deep and frightening abyss during temper tantrums.

*Children do not plan on tantrums; they fall into them, helplessly.* Children do not have tantrums to get their way; they have tantrums because they have lost their way. Children are not trying to show who is boss; they are enslaved by their own impulses and regression. For that reason, we believe that parents should hold their child responsible for the behavior that preceded his tantrum, but not for his behavior during a tantrum.

**Responding to tantrums:** We advise parents to consider temper tantrums to be tiny traumatic experiences to be avoided if at all possible. Children will still have tantrums even though their parents' anticipatory help may reduce their frequency. Understanding that tantrums are terrifying for children, and why this is so, equips parents to provide developmentally supportive help.

First, parents should do whatever is necessary to provide physical safety for their child and for the people and things around him or her. A child's panic will increase if his or her out-of-control impulses cause pain or destruction. It may be helpful for parents to think of their child at those moments as a flailing 6-month-old who is entirely dependent upon parental assistance. Even though a child might protest, it is important that parents provide safety with physical restraint that is as gentle and non-intrusive as possible.

Children in the midst of tantrums need their parents to remain in as much contact with them as they will tolerate. Children vary widely with regard to their tolerance for their parents' presence, whether it is through touch, hearing or vision. Parents should accept their child's need for them to remain at a distance — remember that the child has lost his complete confidence in his parent as a protecting and comforting figure. Perhaps the child will need his mother or father to be in kitchen as he or she settles down in the adjoining family room. However, we strongly recommend that a parent establish the distance between himself or herself and their child on the basis of the child's tolerance for a parent's presence, rather than on the basis of an effort on the parent's part to isolate the child.

We strongly recommend against parents placing children younger than age 6 in their rooms during a tantrum, unless it is with an open door and with easy

access to their parent in an adjoining space. Isolating a child who is regressed and feeling intolerably alone simply takes advantage of the child's fear. Although it is true that many children will settle down more quickly if they are isolated in their room, their behavioral improvement is in response to the increased panic that has been produced by the isolation.

Our extensive experience with children developing both typically and with emotional difficulties supports our belief that good behavior that is a product of fear does not support positive personality growth; furthermore, it can have indirect negative consequences.

Children's tantrums are usually frightening and exhausting, and they often require the rest of the day to recover their emotional strength and confidence. After a tantrum, a child may be fussy, have trouble making up his or her mind, need extra time for the bedtime ritual, or have nightmares. In other words, the child will likely remain regressed, and will benefit from his or her parent's increased availability and support. Parents should consider waiting for at least an hour after the end of the tantrum before discussing any misbehavior that may have led to the tantrum, or administering any consequences for misbehavior. The child will need the time to regain enough of his or her emotional center to bear the upset about any consequences. Because the tantrum represents a spinning out of control, there is no sense in punishing a child for the behavior during the tantrum.

Tantrums are trying times for children — and for parents who may feel helpless, distressed about their child's suffering and angry about their child's behavior. However, tantrums are also times when parents can help their child achieve a greater tolerance for powerful emotional storms, through parental presence, compassion and willingness to bear the emotion along with their child. A parent's capacity will become their child's capacity, transferred through the loving connection. Even temper tantrums — those dark, pernicious moments — offer a child the opportunity to grow in emotional strength and resourcefulness.

