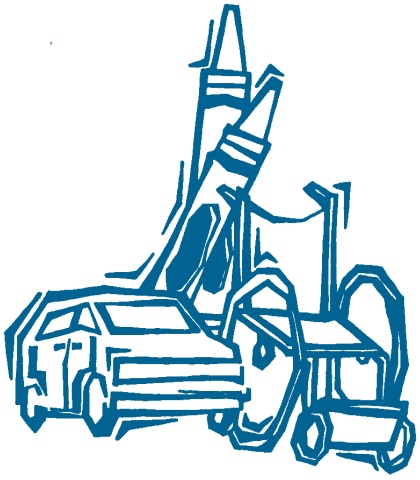

FAMILY

Children's Anger and Tantrums no. 10.248

by R.J. Fetsch and B. Jacobson [1]

Quick Facts...

Tantrums typically appear at age 2 or 3 and start to decline by 4.

Twenty-three to 83 percent of all 2- to 4-year-olds have occasional temper tantrums.

How parents respond is critical in tantrum management.

Parents can learn to calm themselves, state clear rules, notice and compliment appropriate behavior, and teach understanding and empathy.

Ten practical guidelines are offered for parents who want to learn healthy ways of dealing with children's anger and temper tantrums.

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All of us who are parents or who are involved with children and youth can play a vital role in their lives by learning to be the best parents we can be. How? By practicing effective parenting strategies from very early on.

One of the best opportunities for parents and their children to learn effective parenting and anger management strategies is when children get angry or have temper tantrums. If parents can manage their reactions to temper tantrums well, they can manage many other parenting situations.

What Are Temper Tantrums?

Temper tantrums are a common behavior problem in preschool children who may express their anger by lying on the floor, kicking, screaming, and occasionally holding their breath (5). Tantrums are natural, especially in children who are not yet able to use words to express their frustrations.

Tantrums typically occur at age 2 to 3 when children are forming a sense of self. The toddler is old enough to have a sense of "me" and "my wants" but is too young to know how to satisfy the want. Tantrums are the result of high energy and low ability to use words to get needs or wants met.

Tantrums typically peak between ages 2 and 3, and start to decline by 4. They usually run their course within a year. Twenty-three to 83 percent of all 2- to 4-year-olds have temper tantrums at least occasionally (2, 3, 7, 8, 15).

Most children throw tantrums in a particular place with a particular person. They usually are a public display after the child has been told "no" to something he or she wants to do. The tantrum usually stops when the child gets his or her wish. What happens with the temper tantrum depends on the child's level of energy and the parent's level of patience and parenting skill (16).

Causes of Temper Tantrums

There can be many causes of temper tantrums. Some of the causes are indicators of family problems: inconsistent discipline, criticizing too much, parents being too protective or neglectful, children not having enough love and attention from their mother and father, problems with the marriage, interference with play, emotional problems for either parent, meeting a stranger, rivalry with brothers or sisters, having problems with speech, and illness (2). Other common causes of temper tantrums include being hungry or tired.

Children who have temper tantrums often have other problems like thumb sucking, head banging, bed wetting and problem sleeping. If these behaviors happen, or if your child has temper tantrums that last more than 15 minutes or occur three or more times a day at younger than 1 or older than 4, seek help from a family physician, psychologist, or marriage and family therapist. Be advised to seek more than an exclusively behavior therapy approach, for results

have been reported to be about equally effective and ineffective (11, 14, 17). An approach is recommended that combines the best of behavior modification, family systems thinking (1), and other approaches like paradoxical intervention (6).

Sometimes temper tantrums in preschool children are the beginning of patterns that lead to children becoming increasingly disobedient, rebellious and aggressive as they grow older. At the Oregon Social Learning Center, aggressive boys in angry families were studied (12, 13). A complex pattern was observed that included:

- Parents have trouble with some stressor events like divorce, prolonged unemployment, illness, alcohol or other drug problems, other chronic problems, or dealing with a difficult child.
- Parents have difficulty controlling children's teasing, yelling, disobedience, whining.
- Parents allow the child to get away with angry displays.
- As children learn what they can get away with if they are encouraged to display temper tantrums, angry outbursts, etc., they become increasingly disobedient, rebellious and aggressive.
- More and more peers reject the child and parents tend to reject or avoid the child, too.

"To behave rightly, we ourselves should never lay a hand on our servants [or children] as long as our anger lasts.... Things will truly seem different to us when we have quieted and cooled down." --Montaigne

Carol Tavris (16), in her book, *Anger: The Misunderstood Emotion,* writes about the pattern becoming circular and occurring hundreds of times each day. She sees the pattern as a three-step process:

1. The child is attacked, criticized, or yelled at by an exasperated parent, brother or sister;
2. The child responds aggressively.
3. The child's aggression is rewarded when the attacker withdraws and the child learns to use tactics such as whining, yelling and temper tantrums.

When other family members also use these methods, the problems increase. At the Oregon Social Learning Center, Patterson (12, 13) found that when angry exchanges lasted longer than 18 seconds, the family had an increased chance of becoming violent. When talking or even yelling went on and on, it often led to hitting.

The problem is often, though not always, inept, inconsistent parenting. One solution lies in stopping the shouting, scolding, or spanking; in getting oneself calm; stating clear rules and requiring compliance; noticing and complimenting appropriate behavior; and following through with logical consequences.

Parents can learn how to nurture and discipline effectively. Overly authoritarian parents who exercise too much power and use discipline punitively can learn more effective "authoritative" parenting. Overly permissive parents who exercise too little power and use too little discipline can also learn to be authoritative parents. As is often the case, balance is important. Authoritative parents learn daily when and how to discipline their children effectively by setting standards, enforcing rules, exercising authority when necessary, and yet recognizing children's rights (4, 9).

Guidelines for Parents

From a number of research studies plus Tavris, the following guidelines are suggested for building child self-control and self-esteem.

1. Learn to deal with your own and others' anger.

When parents discipline out of anger or with expectations that are

inappropriate for the age of their child, they often make mistakes in the way they react. The place to begin is with ourselves. When we feel calm, we can model effective anger and conflict management. Example: "I'm so angry at you right now for dumping your cereal all over the clean floor, I feel like hitting you. But I don't hit, so I'm going to leave and come back when I've calmed down."

2. Distract or redirect the child.

When a child is misbehaving, a calm parent can sometimes re-direct the child's behavior. Example: "Here's a bowl of warm water. Let's put it outside where you can splash all you want."

3. Be prompt and brief with discipline.

One technique you can use is to pick up and remove your small child from the room immediately and isolate him or her for two to five minutes. This also gives you time to get in control of your emotions. Two to five minutes are enough; lecturing is unnecessary. In rare circumstances, it may be helpful to physically hold the child. Be consistent in enforcing rules, especially with older, school-age children. Example: "I'm putting you in your room for 'time out' until you calm down and are ready to talk again." "I want you to go to your room *now* and stay there until you are ready to come out and use words to ask for what you want rather than spitting on people."

4. Try to discover the reason for your child's anger or temper tantrum.

What does he or she want and is not getting? The reasons children have temper tantrums vary: to get attention, get someone to listen, protest not getting their way, get out of doing something they do not want to do, punish a parent for going away, for power, for revenge, from fear of abandonment, etc. Let the child know the behavior is unacceptable. Talk calmly. Example: "Now that we're out of the store and we've both had a chance to calm down, let's talk. I think you were mad at me that I said no to buying the candy you wanted. Is that right?" ... "It is OK for you to be angry at me, but kicking, screaming and yelling that you want candy won't work. It won't get me to buy you the candy."

5. Avoid shaming your child about being angry.

Children in healthy families are allowed to express all their feelings, whether they are pleasant or unpleasant.They are not criticized or punished for having and expressing feelings appropriately, including anger. Some research studies have found that parents' shaming their child's anger can negatively affect their child's willingness to relieve distress in others (10). Example: "You look and sound angry right now. I'd feel angry too if someone messed up my coloring like she messed up yours."

6. Teach children about intensity levels of anger.

By using different words to describe the intensity of angry feelings (e.g., annoyed, aggravated, irritated, frustrated, angry, furious, enraged), children as young as 2 1/2 can learn to understand that anger is a complex emotion with different levels of energy (10). Example: "I was *annoyed* when I had a hot meal ready and all of you were late for dinner." "That man was *so angry* — I think he was *enraged* after someone spray painted his business with graffiti."

7. Set clear limits and high expectations for anger management, appropriate for your child's age, abilities, and temperament.

As parents, we will be angry all the time if we expect our 1-year-old to be toilet trained, our 2-year-old to use 5-year-old words rather than have a temper tantrum, our shy 8-year-old to be a life-of-the-party magician, and our

low self-esteem 15-year-old to snap out of her depressed "funk" and run for Student Council President. Example: "While I want you to know it's OK to *feel* angry, it's not OK to hit others!" "I expect you to help with chores, control your anger without hitting, biting or spitting. I expect you to be honest and thoughtful of others, do your best in school, ask for what you want, and treat others as you would like to be treated."

8. Notice, compliment and reward appropriate behavior.

Teaching your child to do the right things is better (and easier) than constantly punishing bad behavior. Children who get a steady diet of attention only for bad behavior tend to repeat those behaviors because they learn that is the best way to get our attention, especially if we tend to be overly authoritarian. Example: "I really liked the way you asked Uncle Charlie to play ball with you." "Thanks, Ebony, for calling me beforehand and asking if you could change your plans and go over to your friend's house after school."

9. Maintain open communication with your child.

Consistently and firmly enforce rules and explain the reasons for the rules in words your child can understand. Still, you can listen well to your child's protests about having to take a national test or measles shot. Example: "Sounds like you are angry at the school rule that says you can't wear shorts, sandals and tank tops to school."

10. Teach understanding and empathy by calling your child's attention to the effects of his or her actions on others.

Invite the child to see the situation from the other person's point of view. Healthy children feel remorse when they do something that hurts another. Authoritative discipline helps them develop an internal sense of right and wrong. Remember, a little guilt goes a long way, especially with a child. Example: "Let's see if we can figure out what happened. First she did her 'nah, nah, nah routine.' Next, I saw you take her doll. Then she came and hit you, and you hit her back."

Beyond the Tantrum Stage

Most tantrums and angry outbursts come and go as children and youth grow in their ability to use language and learn to solve problems using words. But occasionally, fits of temper and violence persist into elementary school and may signal serious problems. Sometimes there are biological sources of anger that require diagnosis by a physician or psychologist.

If someone is getting hurt or if you use the suggestions listed in this fact sheet and nothing seems to work, it is time to get professional help. Ask your physician, school guidance counselor or psychologist for names of those skilled in working with children on anger issues. Or, check the yellow pages under counselors, for psychologists and marriage and family therapists who specialize in child behavioral problems.

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