



Temper Tantrums: When Acting Out Is a Cry for Help.

How to Recognize When Temper Tantrums Are a Cry for Help

by Laura Ramirez

In last month's column, we learned that it's best to ignore your child when she's acting out or exhibiting other negative behaviors. If your child throws temper tantrums, let her have her feelings, but don't reinforce them with attention. As with every good rule, there are exceptions. While it's important not to reward negative behaviors, it's crucial to recognize when your child is crying out for help.

Let me illustrate. Recently, I attended a conference on "Guidance and Discipline" at my eldest son's preschool. Following the presentation, the mother of a three-year-old raised her hand and described how her daughter had recently started acting out and throwing terrible, hour-long temper tantrums. Later, she happened to mention that her husband had moved out three months ago and that he'd had no contact with them since.

When I commented that this could be the reason for her daughter's temper tantrums, she replied, "No, I don't think so. It doesn't seem to have affected her at all."

This woman's denial stunned me. It's amazing that a mother could be so disconnected from her child. And it's equally astonishing that she could so easily dismiss the fact that a primary attachment had been severed. But that's what denial looks like. While the mother has buried her head in the sand, her daughter is crying out for help, trying desperately to get her mother's attention. If there is one truism of family life, it's that your child will start acting out what you

deny.

Temper tantrums are ways for your child to express feelings that are too complex for her to verbalize. This is particularly true if the child is still developing her language skills. Acting out and temper tantrums can be used to express a range of feelings. The trick is to determine what your child is trying to say. She might feel frustrated. She might be trying to manipulate you into giving her something that she wants. She might be tired or hungry. Or she might be saying, "Help me! I'm frightened. Something's changed that I don't understand. I need you, but I don't know how to tell you."

The child in our real life scenario is carrying a heavy load. When bad things happen, children tend to blame themselves. In addition, this child is probably secretly terrified that one day, her mother will leave her too.

If a parent or significant caretaker leaves, talk about it with your child. Give concrete explanations for why the person left. Keep your reasons simple. This will foster understanding, so that the child doesn't blame herself.

As time goes on, help her mourn her loss. If possible, don't destroy the hope that the person might come back, but don't give false hope either. If things escalate, see a counselor or therapist. And if your child's in school or daycare, make sure you tell her caretaker what's occurred, so any temper tantrums can be handled with perspective. While your privacy is at stake, so is the well being of your child.

Remember that children need stability in order to feel safe. Major changes in their lives are going to cause upset. Even minor things, like a change in schedule can be stressful and cause temper tantrums. If you know that something is about to change, set expectations by discussing it beforehand. By doing so, you'll remove the element of surprise, which will lessen stress and the chance of acting out. When the change occurs, spend extra time with your child. This will help her feel safe in her new environment and reassure her that she is loved.

To determine if temper tantrums are serious, take a look at what's happening in your child's life. Have there been any significant changes? Any minor upsets? Has she had her nap, is she hungry, or thirsty? Did she ask you for something that you forbid her? It may be hard at first to consider the source in the midst of wailing and whining, but you'll get the hang of it. And the more you practice, the more your awareness will increase. Remember, as parents, it's not just our responsibility, but our honor to learn to read our child.

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