

What If I Feel Like Having a Tantrum When My Toddler or Preschooler is *Misbehaving (*Having Difficulty Controlling Their Behavior in the Face of Strong Feelings)?

We all respond less than positively to feelings like hurt, frustration, disappointment, and anger at times, and this is true for children, as well. We are not all the same in terms of how strongly we experience feelings, how quickly we behave in response to these feelings, or how strong a behavior we exhibit (how loud our voice, whether we have a “tantrum,” with stomping, hitting things, or throwing objects). However, there are rules in classrooms, workplaces, and out in the world which we are required to follow so that, if our reaction is strong enough that it is interfering with our ability to function as expected by others, we get into some kind of trouble.

How we regulate our behavior in response to strong feelings is learned, which is a good thing, because that means we can change the way we react even if we have tendencies (inherited or from modeling the behaviors of others) that fall outside of what is considered appropriate behavior.

In early childhood, difficulty expressing feelings, controlling behavior in response to feelings, and using words instead of actions to persuade people to give them what they want or need are all expected since children this age are still learning about these things. Some children—as is true of adults—have stronger personalities, higher levels of energy, and “shorter fuses” than other children, but children can learn strategies for behaving within acceptable limits, and it is important for us to think of our responses to their difficult behaviors as teaching them these strategies.

In order to provide the guidance and teaching that is necessary, we first need to be able to maintain our own ability to control our behavior and use words instead of actions when we are faced with a child’s tantrum amidst other stresses in our lives.

It is important that we, as parents and other adults, remain calm and neutral in our responses in the face of our children’s tantrums, since this is crucial to being able to effectively help them learn from those experiences rather than making things worse (escalating the child’s behavior, making the child feel bad about themselves, the child not learning how to control their behavior, and perhaps even learning that yelling and hitting are good ways to deal with anger).

What do children need from us as their caregivers and teachers?

In parenting and teaching, it is children’s emotional connection with us and our nurturing responses that are helping them to grow socially, emotionally, and intellectually. This means that:

1. Children need adults around them to be “present” with them
2. “Presence” requires being in a certain way with children
 - a. Staying connected, focused, and attentive; being at their physical level
 - b. Listening intently -- hearing their feelings (however expressed) and thoughts
 - c. Being responsive—tell them thoughts and feelings you are hearing
 - d. Remaining calm in the face of their strong feelings and difficult behavior

3. To be nurturing of children's development, we need to be
 - a. Able to be fully attentive when responding to their needs
 - b. Interested in—even fascinated by—children's development
 - c. Emotionally available—able to put aside our personal stresses for the moment

While this attentive responsiveness to children in our classroom or at home is not always easy to provide, it becomes even more difficult in the face of a child's "meltdown." Children need our emotional connection and nurturing responses perhaps, even more, when they are upset.

What can interfere with our ability to be present, active and nurturing with children?

Being fully and actively present and responsive to children takes emotional stability and physical energy—so self-care for the adult is important! Generally maintaining a balanced lifestyle with regard to sleep, diet, exercise, and involvement in recreational, social, and other activities we value will help us with our own personal wellness. It will also provide a helpful backdrop to being an effective parent or teacher. Here, the focus is on an awareness of what is going on for us at the particular time that may interfere with our ability to provide a helpful response when a child is having difficulty controlling their behavior.

Stress: We experience stress based on what is going on outside of ourselves (a child's behavior, behavior of other individuals in the household/classroom, aspects of the environment--noise level, temperature).

Stress also comes from what is going on inside of ourselves (our thoughts, feelings, physical sensations).

Our internal responses to internal and external stresses can cause us to withdraw to varying degrees from the surroundings and people around us—causing us to not be totally present and aware and engaged. Becoming aware of when this is happening can allow us to take note of what we are experiencing personally, and then choose to re-engage in what is happening in the moment.

Our automatic internal responses to events, interactions, individual adults or children, etc., are based on our own current and historical experiences, and these can cause us to react in certain ways that may not be what is most needed when a child is upset.

What can we do to re-align our attention to responding to our child in the most effective way?

- Practice awareness of the moment: taking note of the external factors (being in the middle of a task; being late for an appointment) affecting you at the moment as well as the internal ones (not feeling well, muscle tension, rising anger)—can help you be present and conscious of what is happening for you
- Stay present to external things and events and people: this is crucial to not only ensure safety of our children, but to stay attuned to and connected to them
- Stay present to internal things like your thoughts, feelings, and sensations: this will give you clues as to how you are responding to what is going on around you—are you bored, are you anxious, are

you enjoying yourself, is a child making you angry, are you feeling at ease with knowing how to respond to a child, are you feeling helpless

- Pause to become aware of your internal responses: this can provide you with the opportunity to think of choices of ways to respond and to choose a response as a conscious decision, rather than an unconscious reflex or automatic reaction; one possible choice is to use a quick calming strategy before acting
- Practice the **“PAUSE”**: just STOP and notice the moment--breathe, watching completely the inhale and exhale 3 times; think about your choices for action at the moment and consciously choose what you will do
- **SMILE** (our children are watching!): Take a moment to bring a smile (if a smile would not inflame things) or relaxed expression to your whole face. If you have time, try this, and maybe do it together with your child (especially if you have practiced it with them before)
 - sit comfortably and take a deep, diaphragmatic breath and exhale completely; then
 - breathe in, through the nose, to the count of five
 - lower your chin to chest, as you close your eyes and breathe out, through the nose, to count of five
 - bring a smile to your mouth and then, lift your chin, as you breathe in to the count of five
 - open your eyes as you breathe out to the count five, a natural smile on your lips and in your eyes!

Everyone Benefits!

It is important to remember that we are social beings. It has long been known that children grow more socially, emotionally, intellectually, and even physically in the presence of caretakers with whom they experience a secure attachment and who are emotionally responsive. Recent research indicates that ALL of our brains—including those of adults—change as the result of social interactions. So, adults are also gaining from their genuine, emotionally connected interactions with children, both in the moment (through the secretion of hormones that make us feel good and safe) and over time, with actual changes in the structures of the brain! Being “present” is as important—and as pleasurable—for the adult, as for the child.