**Thoughts on A Common Concern of Parents : Temper Tantrums**

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What defines a temper tantrum? How do we characterize it?

What should I do about my child’s temper tantrums? These questions reflect common concerns of parents.

Helping your child with temper tantrums depends on many different factors. They include the age of the child, the meaning of the temper tantrums for the child and parents, the frequency and intensity of the temper tantrums, and the social context of the temper tantrums.

Temper tantrums normally occur when your child is a toddler until they are about three or four years old. They may reflect the child’s growing struggle with becoming separate from their beloved parents while maintaining the parents’ love as well as anxieties about becoming independent while maintaining dependency on their parents. In a very young child, tantrums occur when the child’s sense of omnipotence is temporarily disrupted. That is, when the child cannot conceive of being deprived of a wish or when an impulse is disrupted.

After that time, temper tantrums may reflect a problem in the child’s development because they represent responses that appear to be out of proportion to expectable behavior for a child’s age. These kinds of outbursts can have many different sources. As symptoms, they may represent a temporary response to stress or a more serious situation. They may also represent a transient phase in development. In addition, parents may feel overwhelmed because it’s hard to understand where the outbursts come from or how to respond.

Parents might find it helpful to reflect on the history of their child’s tantrums. How long have they had difficulties? Is it a temporary problem or a continuation of previous behavior? What kinds of changes have occurred in the child’s and parents’ lives? Were there any significant separations or losses in the family, such as divorce, death, or even a move to a different neighborhood or school? What about apparently positive changes in the family, i.e., the birth of a sibling or remarriage? Did one of the parents have temper tantrums? Did one of their siblings have tantrums? How did the parents’ parents handle it?

In addition, common problems of living, such as career or personal stresses, can upset parents and create tension in their child, contributing to temper tantrums. The child also can have social, educational or medical problems. They may feel pressured at school and then express their distress by having temper tantrums at home. They may react to family issues, such as surgery and/or illness, for one or both parents. They may be sensitive to challenges faced by one of their siblings, where the sibling requires extra attention from the parents and they feel a pressure to act responsibly beyond what can be expected for their age. Moreover, the child may sense their family constellation as “different” from other families and be unable to articulate this to parents, who perceive that since the child is not reporting anything, the situation may be under control.

A child with an uncommon name or ethnic heritage may be teased at school yet be unable to bring this to the attention of the parents, who of course, named her/him, and are of the same ethnic background.  So how can a parent respond to temper tantrums? Understanding the sources and meanings of your child’s outbursts is a first step. Then consider your own responses. Which responses have been most helpful to your child, and which have not? What about your spouse’s or partner’s responses? Do you feel emotionally overwhelmed? If so, what will help you calm down enough to think through how to help your child? Do you have a trusted friend or partner whom you can talk with? Also, consider what were you like at your child’s age? Did you have temper tantrums yourself? If so, why? How did your parents and other significant adults in your life handle tantrums? Did they throw them themselves? How did you feel about their responses to your feeling overwhelmed emotionally?

Learning to calm your own emotions, finding sources of emotional support for yourself and considering your responses to and feelings about these questions and issues provide the way to helping your child. If you find yourself stuck in this process of understanding yourself and your child, you may consider consulting with a therapist who works with children and their parents to help the child get back on the track of normal development and help the parent or parents as well.