



Handling Tantrums and Meltdowns

Tantrums and meltdowns are an inescapable part of parenting. The Supermarket Trip Of Which We Do Not Speak of 2016, That Time Chris Screamed The Doctor's Surgery Down...they go down in family history, to be recounted with a wry smile at family barbeques, 21sts, and other such suitable occasions. In the actual moment, when faced with your screaming, tantruming child, it's quite a different story.

So what can we do about tantrums? Well, that depends very much on what the underlying cause is. Let's look at some of the main causes of tantrums.

Is it caused by...Tiredness and Hunger

Hunger and tiredness disrupt the body's hormones and natural calming mechanisms. Not only that, but when your blood sugar levels get too low, the body releases stress hormones, which we experience as anxiety, grouchiness, and/or agitation. This is why so many families experience regular after-school meltdowns – your child's brain has been working hard all day soaking in information, practicing social skills, and maintaining attention and concentration. By the time the school bell rings, it's had enough. An older child, teenager or adult may be able to grab a snack and give themselves some down-time. A younger child won't necessarily recognise that this is what they need. Structuring a healthy snack and some play time before homework/chores into the afternoon routine may help your child to gather themselves, and stabilise their blood sugar levels and mood.

Is it caused by...Too Big Feelings

For toddlers in particular, tantrums and meltdowns are usually more about big emotions that are simply too much to handle (e.g. disappointment, indignation, and frustration) rather than power and control. Remember, little people live in a world with a lot of restraints. Clothes restrict their movements, their still-developing motor skills restrict the things they can do for themselves, parents restrict them from eating nothing but ice-cream, befriending unfamiliar dogs, experimenting with electricity, and other exciting pastimes. They have limited autonomy, limited authority, and limited power. And they don't yet have the life experience to see the big picture and put things into perspective, or the emotional regulation skills to smoothly navigate life's ups and downs.

Responding empathetically helps your child to feel heard and her emotional experience validated. Help her calm down by doing calming strategies with her, holding her, or simply sitting with her. You can remind your child that screaming, hitting, and flinging themselves around is not an appropriate way to express disappointment. But keep the focus on modelling and providing more helpful ways of coping with big feelings.

Is it caused by...Picking up on your stress

Life is busy. Between careers, housework, errands, unexpected happenings, and parenting, we're all trying to fit too many things into not enough time. Children soak up their parents' moods and the emotional atmosphere like little sponges. It's not indulgent to give yourself time to be creative, to rest, to de-stress – it helps you to be the best parent you can be. And you modelling healthy ways of

expressing and managing stress, anxiety, anger and sadness provides your child with ideas for how to do it in their own lives.

Is it caused by...Understimulation

The brain experiences understimulation as stress. Instinctively, we seek to do something to change this state. An adult or older child might pick up a book, jump on the computer, or start a conversation. A younger child, without the same repertoire of resources, may start acting up. Result: immediate attention and novelty! Similarly, if a child is feeling a deficit of attention, or structure, tantrums and meltdowns may result as an attempt to change this stressful, unhappy state. Providing clear structure in the form of routines, rules, and consequences helps to make the child's world feel predictable and safe. Providing regular top-ups of attention helps to make your child's relationship with you feel safe and secure. Redirecting attention or suggesting (or initiating!) activities helps to provide your child with healthy, helpful ways of getting needed stimulation.

Is it caused by...a Desire for Control and to Manipulate

Child Psychologist Margot Sunderland refers to this type of tantrum as the "Little Nero tantrum". It's a power-struggle, therefore, it's important not to play into or reinforce that struggle by engaging with your child until they start calming down (unless their safety is at risk). Then you can sit with them and calmly talk it through. There are several differences between a "Little Nero tantrum" and a tantrum caused by distress (all of the others we've looked at) – usually a Little Nero tantrum doesn't involve tears, and your child can express themselves verbally and argue for what they want.

When a tantrum is underway, there's no point trying to reason with your child. In a Little Nero tantrum, reasoning with the child actually encourages the behaviour. In a distress-based tantrum, the rational, thinking part of the child's brain has gone completely offline, and they're running purely on the emotional and instinctive parts of their brain. Until they've calmed down enough that that reasoning part switches back on, they literally *can't* process anything beyond the feelings they're feeling right now.

As your child calms, praise them for it. During the meltdown, stick to a simple, calm, "We can talk about this when *you* are calm". When they are calm, talk it through using short, age appropriate sentences. Then take some time to reconnect. Cuddles provide a rush of positive chemicals to your child's brain, like oxytocin, which helps to increase calm and feelings of security, and to decrease anxiety and stress. It's also a clear sign that the storm is over, and they are still very much loved.

Finally, tantrums and meltdowns happen for a reason. If they're happening regularly, it's important to investigate what's going on, especially when they don't seem to fit neatly into the above categories. If there's something bigger going on – like bullying, family stress, or a medical condition – you and your child are likely to need more specialised help. A Play Therapist or Child Psychologist can help your child process and work through distress and equip them and the family with practical strategies to use. For more information, you can call, or email us here at Phoenix Place.