



PHOENIX PLACE

Managing Temper Tantrums by Kathy Stirrup

I watched uncertainly and slightly embarrassed as my then under two year old threw one very impressive tantrum right in the middle of Westfield shopping centre. Passers-by looked on with either sympathy or scorn. A familiar scenario? Most parents have had experience of this scenario, or one similar as their young offspring totally loses the plot over something that to us seems inconsequential. Temper tantrums are a rite of passage for a small person, so I thought it might be helpful to take a look at just what temper tantrums are, and how we can help our small charges deal with them, so that they remain a childhood phenomenon, rather than continue on into adulthood. I will be drawing from ideas from Margot Sunderland and her book *“The Science of Parenting”* to do so.

Temper tantrums are too big feelings. They often happen because a small child’s brain hasn’t yet developed the extensive connections from the parts of the brain that control our emotions to the parts of the brain that control rational thought. The bottom line is that *our child’s brain has not yet sufficiently developed to deal with powerful feelings in a socially acceptable way*. Many tantrums are a result of genuine emotional pain and therefore need to be treated with compassion and understanding. This emotional pain may include: the pain of impotence, deep frustration, loss disappointment and feeling misunderstood. As we will see some tantrums **are** over a desire for control over a parent, but these are few.

Temper tantrums can be a really scary experience for a child – it’s not nice to feel overwhelmed and out of control. These feelings are often then mirrored by the parents who are left feeling unskilled, helpless, overwhelmed or ready to explode. It’s vital that the tantrum doesn’t turn into a power struggle, a game of winners and losers, but that it instead involves the parent staying calm and thinking of rational or creative ways to manage the child’s feelings.

Here are some interesting statistics:

- Conflict with parents over food and eating accounts for around 17 percent of toddler tantrums
- Being strapped into a car seat or high chair or stroller activate the brain’s rage system and accounts for more than 11 percent of tantrums
- Getting dressed restricts a child’s movements in much the same way as being put in a stroller and accounts for about 11 percent of tantrums.

Although they’re no fun while they’re happening, temper tantrums are actually an essential tool in helping form important brain pathways in a child’s brain that help them to manage stress and be positively assertive in later life. As a parent, with a more fully developed brain, you have the ability to help your child manage their too big feelings in a way that is helpful rather than detrimental.

Sunderland suggests that there are two different types of tantrums. The first, and most common type, she calls a “distress tantrum” and the second, a “little Nero tantrum”. Each type needs a specific response. With the little Nero tantrum you need to move away from the child, with the distress tantrums you need to move towards the child with comfort and solace.

Distress tantrums

“A distress tantrum means that one or more of the three alarm systems in your child’s lower brain (the basic instinct part of the brain) has been very strongly activated. These alarm systems are rage, fear, and separation distress. As a result the child’s arousal system will be way out of balance, with too high levels of stress chemicals searing thought his body and brain” (Sunderland, *The Science of Parenting*, pg. 122)

Distress tantrums happen because essential brain pathways between the emotional and the thinking parts of a child’s brain have yet to be developed. This leaves them literally unable to manage their too big feelings. As parents we need to calm and soothe our child while they ride these great waves of feelings which also trigger huge hormonal surges in brain and body.

There are some important things to understand when your child is in the middle of a distress tantrum.

- *Children can’t talk or listen well when distressed.* Changes in the brain’s chemicals and brain immaturity mean that your child’s thinking functions and verbal centres go offline. Trying to reason with your child during a distress tantrum or expecting them to talk about their feelings or what’s going on for them is a waste of time. All they are able to do at this point in time is discharge their emotions.
- *A distress tantrum needs sensitive handling.* It’s important that you take distress tantrums seriously and meet your child’s big feelings such as pain of loss, frustration, or acute disappointment with sympathy and understanding. In doing this you will be helping your child to develop vital stress regulating systems to their thinking parts of their brain. This help means that your child can develop the brain pathways that enable them to calm themselves down when under stress. It is deeply reassuring to a child to know that an adult can calm and understand the too big feelings coursing through their body.

Handling distress tantrums

Your role as a parent is to give your child a sense of safety, comfort and reassurance when they are having a distress tantrum. These techniques can help to calm your child.

- *Use simple, calm actions or provide a simple choice.* For example if the tantrum is over getting dressed, then provide a clear choice of two items for them to choose from.
- *Distraction* can be a good diversion when a temper tantrum is imminent. It activates the seeking system in your child’s basic instinct part of the brain and makes them feel curious or interested in something. This in turn overrides the brain’s rage or distress systems. It also helps release the chemical dopamine which acts as a stress reducer and triggers interest and motivation.
- *Hold your child lovingly.* Sometimes it helps to hold your distressed child. Firstly check to see that you yourself are calm and in control. Your child will draw from your calm to help restore their own and release natural calming oxytocin and opioids. Simple words such as “I know, I know” can let them see that you are with them, you understand. If they are thrashing about or throwing things or attempting to bite and kick, then holding them firmly but lovingly from behind keeps you both safe from harm.
- *Sometimes a child will feel safe and contained* with you just sitting down calmly next to them and talking gently. Some children find this preferable to being held as it gives them freedom of movement.

- *Remind yourself that the child's distress is genuine.* We need to remind ourselves that things that we might deem as inconsequential can be ~~seen as~~ majorly important to a child. Small children don't have an adult's life experiences to draw on when making judgement calls on events. For example, a two year old who is screaming because his sibling has taken his toy car isn't just making a fuss. This perceived loss triggers the pain centres in the brain causing agonising opioid withdrawal. As adults we know that this loss of a toy is a minor disappointment, but for a child without life's experience, it's all consuming.

Little Nero tantrums

*"The little Nero tantrum is different from the distress tantrum in that it is about the desire to control and manipulate. A child having a little Nero tantrum doesn't experience or show the anguish, desperation, that characterise the distress tantrum and he doesn't have the stress chemicals flooding his brain and body." (Sunderland, *The Science of Parenting*, pg. 128)*

The little Nero tantrum is about the child trying to get what they want – attention, a particular toy, or food – through bullying their parent into submission. Children who have little Nero tantrums need to learn that they can't always receive the gratification that they want immediately, and that it's not ok to bully or control people to get what they want in life.

How do we handle little Nero tantrums?

Little Nero tantrums need very different responses to the distress tantrums. The following are some techniques that keep you in the in charge seat of the relationship

- *Don't give your child an audience.* If you are sure that your child isn't having a distress tantrum then walk away. If you ignore your child's little Nero tantrum it loses its effectiveness.
- *Don't try to reason, argue with or persuade your child.* Attention and words reward their negative behaviour.
- *Don't kiss it better.* This gives your child the message that, "When you go into a rage I will give you lots of love".
- *Don't negotiate.* Doing this rewards controlling angry behaviour.
- *Give clear, firm "No".* Keep calm yourself, don't join them in their rage.
- *Deal firmly with your child's demands.* Give a clear firm message that these demands are not appropriate behaviour in getting what they want. You might say something like, "I'll be happy to talk with you about what you would like when your voice is as quiet as mine". Then get on with what you are doing until your child is calmer. It's important that you don't engage with your child whilst they are using control and dominance as a way of requesting something. Any conversation with them rewards their rage and power seeking behaviours.
- *Give information about social charms.* With older children, who have developed more access to the thinking and reasoning parts of their brain, you might say something like, "People won't want to help you when you order them about. Can you think of a way of asking that will unlock my kind feelings? If you need help with that then let me know." Or you could say something simpler like, "Hey, Toby, that won't work with me"
- *Use humour and play when appropriate.* This can deflate a little Nero tantrum's power seeking. Mirror them back to themselves using an inanimate object to create humour. You could say something like, "you really do want to boss me around, don't you? This is what I am hearing (addressing a can of peaches) Can of peaches, get me a cookie" By now your

child will probably be looking at you like you are a little crazy but the idea is to stop them in their tracks, move you both into the realm of humour and play and mirror back the behaviour that you are seeing. It will also tell them that you won't be manipulated or bullied.

- *Use time out as a last resort.* I personally am not a big fan of time out, but it is sometimes necessary to move your child from midst of activity to a quieter place of reflection, in order for them to process that their behaviour is unacceptable – for example if the attempt at control or bullying escalates into hurting others.
- *Distinguish between a little Nero tantrum and a distress tantrum.* Sometimes this is difficult as one can run into the other. As we have just said, it's important not to reward controlling or bullying behaviours, but if your child moves into a grief reaction when you say "no" and you can see that the pain is genuine, they will need help with their too big feelings. The message that you give your child will be, "I don't respond to commands, but I will always help you if you are in pain."

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