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**"What to do in the middle of a tantrum. 5 things to do next time your**

**pre-schooler unleashes their fury."**

**Presentation Notes by Kathy Stirrup**

I want you to think about a time in your life that you’ve been absolutely frustrated at something or someone. I want you to think about the other emotions that were hovering around that frustration, maybe anger, maybe a sense of hopelessness, maybe sadness or despair? If this was a recent event then chances are you had a process that you went through to help you calm down and work out a solution to whatever was frustrating you, or an acceptance that nothing could be done and you would have to just leave whatever it was alone for the moment or forever. This process might have been conscious, or it might be that after years of having to go through this same process you just went through it automatically. There might have been some deep breaths taken, there might have been a physical or figurative shaking off of the clawing frustration, you might have had to remove yourself away from the source of the frustration to begin to find your calm, then when some calm was found you might have done a mental rundown of what to do about the frustration.

Now, a second scenario. We’ve all been there with our own child, or seen it happening with others, the child that is screaming and flailing around on the ground, seemingly overcome with emotions as you stand by feeling helpless to know what to do, maybe feeling embarrassed (if it’s happening in a public place), maybe angry, usually feeling a distinct lack of control yourself as to how best to deal with this little hurricane before you.

So what’s different about these two situations?

So let’s start with looking at just **what tantrums are**

Contrary to popular belief tantrums are often, **not** attention seeking devices designed to manipulate a parent. Rather they are born out of an overwhelmed brain. A brain that has yet to form ways of dealing with powerful feelings in a socially acceptable way. A brain that when these big feelings hit, shuts down the access pathways to the thinking parts of it and instead acts purely on emotions and basic instincts (fight/flight/freeze). Putting yourself in your child’s shoes and trying to see things from their perspective can help in not taking the tantrum as a personal affront, opening yourself up to being able to help them through their tantrum, equipping them with stress regulating tools that they can then take into later life. Many tantrums are the result of real emotional pain such as feelings of having no control, or deep frustration, loss, disappointment or feeling misunderstood.

Temper tantrums are scary for the child themselves. It’s not at all fun feeling out of control. As we have already mentioned, temper tantrums can also leave the parent feeling unskilled, helpless and overwhelmed too. It’s really important that the parent, as the adult in the situation, therefore, takes charge and stays calm thinking of rational and or creative ways to help your child manage their feelings. We will go into that in more detail in a moment.

Something that you might not of thought about in regard to temper tantrums is that they are actually “key times for brain sculpting” Margot Sunderland (Author of *The Science of Parenting*) says that ‘’the emotional regulation of a child’s feelings during storms of feeling enables him to establish essential brain pathways for managing stress and being assertive in later life.” So maybe rather than cringing and wanting to disappear into the floor when your child is having a temper tantrum you could instead congratulate yourself on having a child that provides you with opportunity to teach this important skill of self-regulation.

**Two different types of tantrums**

Sunderland classifies tantrums into two different categories. The first type, which we have touched on briefly, she terms as **distress tantrums.** The second as **Little Nero Tantrums.** Each needs a specific response. With little Nero tantrums you need to move away from your child, with distress tantrums you need to move towards with comfort and solace, so it’s important to know the difference.

**Distress tantrums.**

A distress tantrum is one in which one or more of your child’s basic instinct alarms have been triggered, those of rage, fear and separation distress. This means that your child’s arousal systems will be out of kilter and their body will be dumping large levels of stress chemicals into their brain and body.

Distress tantrums are a result of your child not yet having developed the neural pathways that enable them to handle their too big feelings. So, like I said earlier, our role as their parent is to help soothe them while they experience these huge hormonal storms in their brain and body.

Some things to be aware of when helping your child manage their distress tantrum:

* When a child is in the middle of a distress tantrum it’s like a computer that has gone offline. The dramatic brain and body changes that are happening whilst they are in the midst of their tantrum hijacks your child’s thinking functions and ability to talk so expecting them to tell you what’s happening for them whilst they are in the middle of their tantrum is simply not possible for them. All they can do is discharge their emotions.
* It is important that you understand that when your child is experiencing a distress tantrum that for them it’s serious business and your response needs to be that of compassion. Their intense feelings of pain of loss, frustration, or acute disappointment needs to be met with sympathy and understanding. When they receive help to manage these intense feelings of rage, frustration and or distress they are able to develop the brain pathways that enable them to calm themselves down when under stress.

**What do we do to help our children when they are experiencing a distress tantrum?**

Your role, as we’ve said earlier is to be the calm place of safety in your child’s storm. You are there to give comfort and reassurance. As their parent you will be the one that knows them best, it’s not a one size fits all solution but here are a number of helpful strategies that you can utilize with your child, find what works best for your little person.

* ***Use simple, calm actions*** try to remain calm yourself, getting angry will more than likely just increase their distress. If they are in a place where they can receive input then keep it simple, a choice between two things rather than many, don’t expect them to be able to respond to complex sentences or requests.
* ***Prevention is always better than cure***Work to **eliminate frustration** beyond your child’s limits. It is good for them to be challenged as this helps them in their development but try and step in before this challenge becomes an overwhelming frustration. Guide them, but don’t take over. For example, if they are building a block tower and you can see that it is on the brink of collapsing, shore it up a little before they place their next block on top. **Distraction can work wonders.** If you sense that your child is getting to the end of their coping then a diversion towards another soothing, calming activity – in a different place, or with a different toy or activity, or maybe to a story or a song or something to eat, can help stop the tantrum in it’s tracks. What diversion or distraction does is activates the seeking system in your child’s brain leading them to feel interested or curious about something. This can naturally override the rage or distress systems. It can also release dopamine, a positive arousal chemical in your brain that reduces stress and triggers interest and motivation.
* ***Look for triggers.*** Think about whether your child’s tantrums have a pattern to when they happen. Is it when your child is hungry, or tired, or rushed? Are there situations that your child finds more challenging such as being in a big group of noisy children or in a shopping centre or when being strapped into a child seat? Are there ways in which you can help limit shopping when tired or arrange for a friend or family member to stay with your child whilst you shop or shop online. Maybe you could take along a nutritious snack to have whilst your child sits in the trolley or get them involved in the shop giving them small tasks to do to make it fun rather than a chore.
* ***Sometimes food can be the trigger*** Some children are triggered by foods. Taking note of what foods have been consumed before a tantrum, seeing if this food reoccurs before each tantrum and seeing if taking this food out of your child’s diet makes a difference can be helpful. The main contenders in foods that can trigger tantrums are those with a higher sugar content. Certain preservatives can also cause problems. But it also might be something that your child has an intolerance or allergy to that is causing the problem. Keeping a food diary can be a way of helping isolate the culprit.
* ***Tiredness and hunger*** can also be something that triggers tantrums. Hunger and tiredness disrupt the body’s hormones and natural calming mechanisms. Not only that but when your blood sugar levels get too love, the body releases stress hormones, which we experience as anxiety, grouchiness and/ or agitation. This is why many families experience regular after school meltdowns – your child has been working hard all day soaking in information, practicing social skills, and maintaining attention and concentration. By the time the school bell goes, it’s had enough. An older child or teenager 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 in a healthy snack and some play time before homework/chores into the afternoon routine may help your child gather themselves and stabilise their bold sugar levels and mood.
* ***Choosing your battles*** This is a well-rehearsed mantra in all parenting but is especially helpful in tantrum prevention. Concentrate your energies into things that really matter and avoid unnecessary power struggles. So, if your child is insisting on wearing her princess outfit to pre-school or wants to wear gumboot instead of shoes it usually doesn’t need to be a problem. Allowing a little independence on small things can help your child feel in control and then be more flexible in the things that matter. There are rules that are there to keep your child safe that are obviously non-negotiable but there are often things that we find ourselves digging our heals in about that really don’t matter in the scheme of things. Childproof your home as best as possible and keep rules for the important things.
* ***Offer comfort*** You are the one that knows your child best so you will be in the best position to know what kind of comfort will work best to help calm them and restore their equilibrium. Sometimes your child will need you to hold them to help them calm. You need to be calm and in control yourself for this to have the desired calming affect as they will be borrowing their calm from you until they can access their own. You might offer words of comfort like Ï understand” or Ï know”. If your child is thrashing about and hurting themselves or others, then you might need to use a proper holding technique. Again, this will only work if you are feeling calm yourself. **The idea isn’t to restrain them but to help them feel safe and secure, emotionally held together.** Where possible sit with your back against a wall to support your back. Envelop your child by holding them with their back towards you. (This means that flailing legs and arms won’t connect with you so easily). Fold your arms over theirs. For bigger, stronger children you might take an arm in each of your hands and cross their arms. If needed you can also cross your legs over their legs to contain them too. Hold them calmly and speak to them gently letting them know that all is ok and that you are just holding them to help them calm. As they calm let them lie in your arms and cuddle till they are over the tantrum. Offer them reassurance and maybe redirect, when they are ready, to a quiet activity.

For some children what helps best is your just sitting beside them and talking gently. They need to be able to work it through their systems without restraints. For them restraining them makes them feel trapped rather than comforted or safe. Wait with them whilst they borrow their calm from you and can come to their own peace then offer reassurance letting them know they are loved and cared for regardless of behaviour. If they’ll let you, you might offer them a hug now that they are ready to receive it. When you are able to stay calm and in control during these distress tantrum situations it shows your child that you are in charge and they can trust you to keep them safe and secure when they are feeling their too big feelings. They can then move on.

* ***Express your own feelings appropriately.*** Our children are like little sponges, always taking in what we are doing and saying. It can help them enormously when we can acknowledge and express our own feelings appropriately and honestly giving them emotion language through our own situations. So how might we do this? Reading with your child is a great way to help children understand and explore feelings. In their story books they will see a lot of feelings and how characters deal with them, sometimes well, sometimes poorly. Vicarious learning through characters in books has been shown to improve children’s empathy and emotional intelligence. There are several children’s books out there that help in developing emotional literacy. The author Trace Moroney has a series of books on feelings that have become classics in this area. There is a new one she has just release that is specifically about tantrums called “My Calm Me Down Book” which is getting good reviews. There is also a series called Big Hug Books, each one looking at a topic through an extended simile, using that simile to unpack the various aspects of it. For example, there is one on anxiety that is called “Worries Are Like Clouds” and another on anger “Anger Is Like Armour”. There are other helpful topics in this series like navigating the playground or friendship dynamics.

Besides using books, you can develop your child’s emotional literacy by building a vocabulary with your child of sensations and emotions words. Make it part of your family culture to label the child’s feelings, linking feelings to cause. For example, “I am wondering if Poppy is feeling …. Because …... happened/didn’t happen.” Also talk about how other people might be feeling, or how you yourself are feeling in response to things. You don’t want to overburden them but rather be real in an age appropriate manner. “Mummy is feeling really disappointed right now as she would have liked to buy those shoes but they didn’t have them in her size” “Mummy is feeling really excited as she’s going to spend some time out with her best friend”

Talk to your children about things that calm you, either when they are calm themselves and can receive that information after a tantrum or giving natural commentary to life’s events. “I really like this song; it makes me feel happy and calm”. Or “when I am feeling sad I like to go for a walk in nature”.

When we show empathy towards our child (putting ourselves in their shoes and trying to see things from their perspective) we not only help calm them in their immediate situation but we lay the foundations for later emotional intelligence. Acknowledging your toddlers’ distress with understanding rather than dismissal makes all the difference to how they learn to deal with these strong feelings. It teaches them that their feelings count, that they will be responded to, that there are people that they can rely on and trust to be sensitive to them that it’s safe for them to be open and expressive with their feelings and to ask for what they need.

* ***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 parent’s moods and the emotional atmosphere like little sponges. It isn’t indulgent to give yourself time to be creative, to rest, to de-stress – it helps you be the best parent that you can be and you are modelling healthy ways of expressing and managing stress, anxiety, anger, and sadness providing them with ideas for how to do so in their own lives.
* ***Boredom or 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 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.

**Little Nero Tantrums.**

Little Nero Tantrums are a whole different ball game to distress tantrums, although it is sometimes hard to tell the difference and sometimes little Nero tantrums can morph into distress tantrums. So, what is the difference? A little Nero tantrum is all about control and manipulation. A child having a little Nero tantrum doesn’t experience or show the same anguish, desperation or panic that usually characterize the distress tantrum and they don’t have the stress chemicals flooding their brain like they do in the distress tantrum. So, it’s a whole more controlled affair. They have their thinking brain engaged and use it to articulate their demands, to argue and say no. There usually aren’t tears involved.

A little Nero tantrum is about the child trying to bully their parent into giving them something that they want such as attention, a toy or food or something that they want their parent to let them do. Children who have little Nero tantrums need to learn that sometimes they have to wait for things or they can’t have something and that it’s not ok to bully or control people into getting what they want in life (A certain politician could benefit from learning these lessons). What you don’t want is to reward the little Nero within by giving in to your child’s demand. It is important that your child doesn’t get the idea that it’s ok to manipulate like this. They need you to help them understand that there are better ways of going about expressing their wants and needs. They need to know that you have their best interests in mind and as the adult can often see the bigger picture better than them. Sometimes this means that they don’t immediately get what they want, or sometimes a demand is answered with a “no” as it is not something in their best interest. A child uses the little Nero tantrum as they have learnt that it will get them what they want. They more that you reward this type of tantrum with attention and giving them what they want, the more they will adopt this behaviour. This can lead to training your child to become a bully in later life.

**What do we do to help our children when they are experiencing a little Nero tantrum?**

Little Nero tantrums, as we have said, need a vastly different response than that given to a distress tantrum. You need to take charge and be to one in control rather than them.

* ***Do not provide your child an audience.*** A little Nero tantrum must be a solo performance. If you are sure that your child isn’t having a distress tantrum, i.e. it’s about manipulation and not distress, then walk away from them. It’s hard for them to put on a fine performance without an audience.
* ***Don’t try and reason, argue with or persuade*** your child. Attention and words reward the negative behaviour.
* ***Don’t “kiss it better’*** You don’t want them getting the message that going into a rage will give them lots of love
* ***Don’t negotiate.*** Again, this is rewarding his controlling, angry behaviour.
* ***Give clear, firm “Nos”*** Although it’s difficult when a small human is trying to control you, keep your own temper in check. Be clear and firm, but calm. It might be useful to create a mantra for the situation to help remind you of the importance of this such as “Be bigger, kinder, stronger.” Let them know that this is not the way to go about getting what they want. For example, “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 and more respectful. Don’t pay attention to your child while they are trying to use control and dominance as a way of getting what they want.
* ***Educate your child about the benefits of using social charm.*** This is for older children who have a more developed logical/thinking part of their brain. “If you order people to do something, they won’t want to help you. Can you think of a way of asking that will unlock my kind feelings? If you need help let me know”.
* ***Use humour and play when appropriate.*** This can pop the little Nero’s power bubble. You will be giving them the message that they won’t get away with trying to control you. “Sounds like you really want to boss someone around right now. Ok, lets boss around this shoe, shoe get me that lolly right now!” You aren’t trying to put your child down by doing this, or make fun of him, it’s his behaviour that you are highlighting. You are upstaging him, disrupting his behaviour and working to move it from a conflict situation to a humour/play situation
* ***If your child is hurting others or himself remove him away from others.*** I don’t tend to like taking a child to another room but there is merit on removing a child to another part of the room if they are being hurtful or destructive. Don’t engage with them other than to state what and why you are doing it. “I am putting you’re here because you hit me. It’s not ok to hurt me.”
* ***Distinguish between a little Nero tantrum and a distress tantrum.*** As we have said, this is sometimes difficult as one can run into the other. It is important not to reward demanding or bullying behaviours, but if your child moves into a grief reaction when you say “no” and you can see that it is genuine pain, they will need help with their too big feelings. The message that you give your child will be, Ï don’t respond to commands, but I will always help you if you are in pain.”

Ignoring little Nero tantrums helps your child to develop important social skills. You should never humiliate your child though: he should lose the battle with dignity. Reward your child with your attention as soon as their behaviour improves, move on and let it go.

Finally, tantrums and meltdowns happen for a reason. If they are happening regularly, it’s important to investigate what’s going on and work to do something about it.