

Taming Tantrums:

Limiting (and surviving) your child's meltdowns

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Introduction

This e-book was written by two moms, one a pediatrician, and the other a journalist. Together, we have six children, and have spent decades observing others on the playground, in the grocery store and at doctor's offices. The specific stories told here have been changed to protect privacy, and we often refer to "I," though sometimes it is one of us and sometimes the other. We alternate between referring to a child as "he" and as "she," but everything we say pertains to both genders.

In writing an e-book, our goal was to give you the information you need as quickly as possible. We've organized the book so that the first chapters explain tantrums (and that nearly every child has them) and offer strategies for surviving them in the moment. The middle chapters take the long view, offering strategies for understanding tantrums and heading them off before they can get started. The last two chapters offer advice for dealing with truly intractable tantrums, and the

consequences of letting children reach adulthood without learning the lessons that tantrums can teach.

No book can address all the specific needs you may face at home, but we hope this will offer some strategies that will give you confidence, insights and the knowledge that you are not alone.

About the authors

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PART I: Tantrum Basics

Chapter 1: Why Tantrums Happen

It was a beautiful Sunday afternoon, and my husband and I (this is Dr. McEvoy speaking) realized that we had neglected to expose our three young children, ages two, four and six to any culture. The Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, a somewhat formal Boston institution, seemed like a good option—probably because we were still too sleep-deprived to think clearly. Several hours later amidst the aging Oriental tapestries and lush Rubens paintings, my two-year-old was pounding on the floor, screaming, crying and kicking. Unsure how to abort this embarrassing event, we decided to proceed into the next room, nose in air, wondering who in their right mind would bring a 2-year-old to this museum. He quickly followed us.

No doubt, if you have children and have passed the one-year watershed, you know what a tantrum is. No Wikipedia search is needed for a definition.

For three decades as a practicing pediatrician I have been warning parents that the cute, gurgling baby who is starting to toddle around the living room will soon begin to have opinions. Since words are few, these opinions will often resemble thunder storms or, on occasion, full-blown hurricanes. All this is well within the range of normal. Research shows that tantrums are a nearly universal experience. If an older child doesn't throw them, a younger child usually will.

Oppositional behavior often starts sometimes during the second year of life and blossoms with the “terrible twos.” In my practice, I try to reassure parents that these tantrums are developmentally appropriate, and that if the child does not have them during the twos, he or she may have them at three or later when they are more challenging to manage. Research suggests that two-thirds of children start having tantrums when they are two or three, and—mercifully—well over half are done by age five.

Most tantrums in young children do not last very long although they may seem to at the time. About 75 percent of tantrums last five minutes or less. If the child stamps or drops to the floor in the first 30 seconds, the tantrum is likely to be shorter, researchers at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, found.

Pop quiz and important lessons

Tantrums may be a normal part of your child's development, but they are also a major test of your parenting and can be terrifying to watch. Give in to a toddler's every whim and you'll end up with a child who's hard to live with. Turning a cold shoulder to a terrified child sends an equally bad message. In a few cases, which I'll describe later, chronic or violent tantrums can be a sign of larger problems.

Unlike a test in school, tantrums aren't a one-off quiz. If your child is tantrum-prone, you are likely to be tested repeatedly, particularly if you mishandle the first few explosions. It can get harder to stop tantruming behavior the longer it goes on. But it is almost always possible to stop tantrums with a concerted, constructive approach.

Helping your child learn how to get what she needs without pitching a fit is an important life skill. Children who learn that they have to scream to get their way, or who never develop self-control over their emotions will make lousy adults.

Setting goals

We all know children who insist on getting what they want, and whose parents seem to follow them around for the sole purpose of meeting the king's or queen's demands. My family's favorite example is the fictional (and over-the-top) character Veruca Salt in "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory," by Roald Dahl. Whenever one child starts acting like a spoiled brat, one of us—siblings included—mimics Veruca's British accent. That usually causes enough laughter that whatever was being demanded is forgotten.

Parents worry that if they "give in" to their children's demands too much, they will have a Veruca on their hands. Certainly, letting the child run the household and buying her whatever she wants could create such a difficult child.

On the other hand, parents who harshly discipline their child are also more likely to create problems. Research suggests that three to six year olds whose parents use extreme discipline are more prone to intensely disruptive behaviors than other children.ⁱ

Decades of parenting research shows that the most effective style of discipline for children is a middle ground between these two extremes: authoritative parenting, or child-centered approach, where parents set guidelines and respond to a child's needs. This is likely the best approach for dealing with temper tantrums, as well, and forms the basis for many of the suggestions in this book.

So, the short-term goal is to get your kid to stop screaming and making a scene. And your long-term goal should be to help your toddler or preschooler mature into a child who doesn't need to throw a fit to get what he needs.

Summary: Early tantrums are a sign of your child's development—a hurdle that you must leap over—not an indicator of your failure as a parent. Dealing with tantrums well can vastly improve your family's quality of life and your child's future.

Chapter 2: Surviving the Storm

Molly was a willful 14-month-old who had her heart set on a tasty rawhide bone that the dog had left on the carpet. When Mom took away the bone, her little face turned beet red, and observers braced for the explosion. Nothing happened. Instead she suddenly collapsed on the floor, unconscious. She quickly recovered but not until Mom had called 911 and almost dropped to the floor herself.

Molly had learned that holding her breath until she fainted was an effective way to get attention. Anoxia, a lack of oxygen to the brain, causes babies to fall if they can hold their breath long enough. But once they lose consciousness, the body automatically begins breathing again – inflicting terror on observers, but no lasting damage to the baby.

Children can be very creative in their tantrums. Some simply scream, others lie down on the floor and kick their legs. Others hold their breath until they pass out, bang their heads against the wall or attack themselves. Most healthy children will quickly figure out that self-injurious behavior doesn't get them what they want—unless the parent reacts by giving in—and it hurts!

Tantrums can also include aggressive actions, such as pinching, hitting and biting, that could be characterized as “preschool bullying.” One child I knew loved going to preschool, and with two older brothers, he was confident and happy. However, on the playground he needed to be king. If someone took a toy or ball he was playing with, the boy would deliver a sharp whack. While not unusual, these aggressive behaviors are not okay and need to be dealt with immediately, even if they do result in a short-term tantrum.

There's no one perfect way to handle a tantrum: You need to respond to your child's needs in the moment, and your own situation and even your values. Obviously, you must do whatever it takes to keep her safe. Wandering off, running into streets, playing with dangerous objects are all unacceptable in any circumstance. But whether you let your child have some kind of (hopefully healthy) treat every time he goes to the grocery store is up to you. Just remember that you are the one setting the pattern in the checkout line. You are in control of creating the environment that first time; you won't be if you try to change the rules the fourth time around.

Since tantrums are developmentally predictable in the second year of life, you can prepare for them and not overreact to the screaming bag of clothes at your feet. Walking away from an out-of-control toddler can be an effective strategy. Without an audience, histrionics lose their appeal. However, if the tantrum occurs in a public place, it is not fair to others to temporarily disown your child. A better course of action is to remove the child from the public area and wait for the tantrum to subside.

For some children, physical contact can help stem the emotional outburst. Embrace the flailing child and just hold him until some of the energy abates, and a more rational discussion can follow. “Use your words” is a common phrase heard amidst these battles. Sometimes two-year-olds can put their frustration into words and sometimes they cannot. Toddler meltdowns can be described as the I-don't-know-what-I-want-but-I-want-it-right-away dilemma. This irrational behavior happens most often when children are tired or hungry.

Time outs are often recommended for the out-of-control two-year-old. But what I commonly hear in the office (and have experienced myself) is that the raging two-year-old refuses to stay in the time-out chair. Instead of sending a child somewhere as punishment, you could try finding a comfy spot—in one of my children's classrooms it was a beanbag chair—where your child can go to calm down and regain self-control. Reminders of places where they are safe, such as a favorite blanket or stuffed animal, can also help. If you do choose a time out, most experts suggest one minute of “out” time for every year of age, so three minutes for a three-year-old.

Teaching self-control requires a lot of it

Modeling your own behavior is important during these outbursts. Often the issues that lead to the child's meltdown also set the parent on a road toward frustration, anger and sometimes rage. It should go without saying that hitting a child is not a constructive form of punishment. Although your parents may have taken this approach with you, plenty of research confirms that using force does nothing to stop the unwanted behavior, but it does damage the parent-child relationship and even minor forms of corporal punishment teach the child that violence is acceptable.

Too often when a child is throwing a fit, the parent's own anger leads to pulling the child's arm a little too hard, yelling, or issuing demeaning comments. You're only human and some battles will try your patience more than others, but it is important to stay calm and measured and be totally clear about what behavior was wrong.

If you have another adult with you, it can be tremendously helpful to pass the child off and take a few steps away until you can regain your calm. If this sets your child off more, you can simply explain to your child that this is what you've learned to do when you are getting too upset and want to regain your composure. That way, you will be helping yourself and modeling good behavior for your child.

Cleaning up the damage

After the storm has passed, aim for a follow-up discussion. The important message should be that "I love you, but I do not like the behavior." Be specific and concrete. "I did not like it when you kicked me." "I did not like that you threw your toys on the floor." "I did not like that you pushed your brother." Don't forget to offer hugs and reassurance, too, once the storm has passed and after the unpleasant behavior has been addressed. Forgiveness is an essential piece of the aftermath.

With an older, more reasonable child, you can also approach the tantrum as a problem to be solved together. "You seem to throw a fit every time we go to the grocery store. Do you know why that is and what we can do to avoid it the next time?" Perhaps your child was hungry, and handing over a healthy snack when you get to the store will avert a problem. Or perhaps your child finds the grocery store too overwhelming, and you're better off finding a time to shop when you can leave her at home.

It is often pointed out that parents tend to address bad behavior but often overlook good behavior. Be specific when you compliment your child. "I liked that you helped pick up the toys this morning."

Sibling subterfuge

Jimmy, an inarticulate three-year-old middle child, was having trouble with his older brother, who would needle him in subtle ways until Jimmy exploded. Then Jimmy would go after his brother with an open mouth, leaving vampire marks on any available body part. While Mom understood that both were involved, she always ended up putting a sobbing Jimmy in time-out while the instigating older brother slipped innocently away.

There are several possible solutions to Jimmy's explosions. You could encourage Jimmy to come to an adult when these episodes occur, before resorting to biting. Coaching Jimmy to use his words to stop the abuse might also work, as might suggesting that he leave the scene when the bickering starts. A fourth strategy is to set up a star or sticker chart for Jimmy. Each day that ends without a tantrum results in a star or sticker. At the end of the week with a certain number of stickers, he gets a treat.

What to do

The rest of the chapter includes suggestions for what to do during a tantrum:

Prevention is the best treatment. Read the rest of this book for strategies on how to stop tantrums before they start. Most of this involves meeting your child's genuine needs – for food, safety, attention, etc.

Keep the chuckles to yourself. Believe it or not, toddler tantrums can be funny; they are predictable and it can be amusing to see your baby develop a personality and actually have opinions. Hide your smile if you can. You certainly don't want to encourage the stamping foot. What is cute at 18 months is not cute at eight years.

Avoid using the bedroom for a time-out. The bedroom should be viewed as a refuge for a nap, play, or night time slumber, not as a place for punishment.

Stay close enough to the child to ensure no harm comes to him/her. A screaming child can hurt themselves in the midst of a fit. I know of one 18-month-old whose father put him in a room until he settled down, and the door accidentally locked behind him. He really had a reason to be screaming by the time the fire department arrived to bang the door down. Locking a child away when he's emotional also sends a terrible message that emotions are not permissible, or should be locked away.

Control your own emotions, at least in front of the wailing child. While you may also be tired, hungry and at the end of your rope, you are the adult. Modeling calm behavior in stressful situations can be the best preventive medicine. Speak in a calm, soft spoken voice until the storm passes. If you and your partner communicate by yelling and screaming, it won't be long before your little ones do the same.

Reward good behavior with positive attention, not bad behavior with negative attention. Remember to praise your child when they do something good at least as often as you criticize for behavior you don't like. Negative attention is still attention. Sometimes children figure out that bad behavior gets air time, especially in a chaotic household. If your home is the scene of repeated outbursts, it's time to

take stock of the household dynamics. Perhaps everyone's emotions need to be dialed back. Or the child needs some regularly scheduled one-on-one time with a loving adult.

Make positive promises, instead of idle threats. All parents struggle to follow through on verbal threats and warnings. "If you do that one more time, I am going to give you a time out." The one more time occurs, but by then Mom or Dad is in the middle of cooking dinner or on the phone, and the bad behavior slips by unpunished. Making a threat and not following through makes your child question your authority and honesty, and might encourage him to push the envelope even more to see what will make you follow through. Instead, try making a promise you can follow through with: "If you give Mommy 15 minutes to finish dinner, I promise we can read a book together after dessert."

Rein in use of digital devices. Young children often act out when their parents are distracted. If you are constantly checking texts and e-mails when you are with your child, don't be surprised if your child devises other means to get your attention. A distracted parent does not go unnoticed by a child, and children know that bad behavior may go unpunished if the parent's mind is elsewhere. Be present.

Summary: Tantrums are unpleasant for everyone involved, the screamer as well as the witness. Once a tantrum has started, you can try to calm him down, or let it run its course. Try to avoid common mistakes, and follow up afterwards to provide comfort and reassurance.

PART II: It Takes Three to Tango

A tantrum is the product of three factors: your child, you and the environment. A very placid **child** may not pitch a fit no matter what happens. A high-strung child may get upset over what seems to you like nonsense.

You and other adults in her life also play a role in her tantrums. Any child whose needs are not being met is more likely to be fussy, whether those needs are for reassurance, food, rest or attention.

That is not to say that all tantrums are the parents' fault—they are not. And even if you know that your busyness, stress or impending divorce was a factor in your child's tantrum, it doesn't help to blame yourself. We all get overwhelmed by life some of the time. Beating yourself up for missing the warning signs of a tantrum or not giving him enough attention will hurt him more in the long run than help. But, assuming your child has no underlying health problems, how you respond to those first few tantrums will set the stage for how likely your child will be to make tantrums a habit.

Your environment is also crucial. Children don't spontaneously erupt into tantrums. There's always a trigger—even if you can't see it. Triggers depend on the child's age and personality. An 18-month-old won't notice another child's snub on

the playground; a five-year-old might be devastated by it. A grocery trip that might overwhelm a two-year-old with sights, smells and noises, could be just what your four-year-old needs to keep from going stir-crazy.

In the next few short chapters, I will show you how to be a detective, see the world through your child's eyes, and figure out what might be turning your adorable child into a raging beast.

Chapter 3: A Child's Eye View of Tantrums

Some children are simply more likely to have tantrums than others, regardless of parenting style or environment. Most likely, her biology is to blame. Either she was born high-strung and nervous (sound like someone you know?) or perhaps her digestive system is slow to mature, leaving her in pain and cranky much of the time.

If you have one of these children, you'll just have to soldier through, try your best to meet your child's needs, and understand that you didn't cause this personality or biological quirk.

Even a temperamental child, though, can be taught to better manage his emotions and express his needs, minimizing tantrums. The one exception may be a child with acute health problems who is understandably bad-tempered because he feels lousy. For sick children, you can try to minimize their discomfort, and combat their misery with as much joy as possible. Being sick does not entitle the child to princess behavior, though. Even sick children need limits. Children with chronic diseases want to be treated like other kids. It makes it scarier for them when everyone abandons their usual rules for them, sending the message that "I really am in trouble." (For a great literary example of this, look to Colin in the children's classic "The Secret Garden" by Frances Hodgson Burnett.)

You will not be spoiling your child if you are meeting his or her basic needs. No child is spoiled by getting adequate food, sleep and love. A child is spoiled by giving him things he doesn't need, like expensive toys, in lieu of what he does need, like attention and reassurance.

To meet your child's needs, you must understand them. Try now to toddle a few steps in your child's tiny shoes.

A child's needs and motives are much more basic than yours. Most under-threes don't need much more than safety, food, temperature control, reassurance, rest and a little independence. They are not soap opera characters capable of greed, sophisticated lies, or plotting revenge. No matter what it feels like at the time, her public meltdown is not designed to make you feel like a failure as a parent.

And regardless of how bad it feels for you to watch him disintegrate during your office party, the experience is worse for him than it is for you. Do you remember the last time you had a meltdown, yourself? The feeling of being out-of-control with rage or sadness is quite unpleasant. Afterwards, you probably felt shame and remorse.

Similarly, the fuming toddler experiences the same feeling of being terrifyingly out of control, followed by remorse and emotional insecurity.

Now imagine what it would feel like to be two or three years old and be in charge of your household, with the big people jumping at your every command. It might feel exhilarating to have such control at first, but it would also be unnerving to have that much responsibility decades before you're ready. Children will feel safer if there is an adult they can turn to when life gets scary, when they know where the boundary lies for appropriate behavior, and when they know their needs will be met. They need that far more than they need you as their overindulgent buddy or dictator.

Summary: Understanding your child's world can help you see tantrum triggers more clearly and avoid them—not by caving into a demanding child, but by meeting his basic needs.

Chapter 4: Your Role in the Dance

Sometimes tantrums seem to occur for no good reason, especially around age 2. The toddler mantra “I don't know what I want, but I want it right away!” can appear anytime. But usually, with good detective work, you can help figure out what's behind the demands—her need for food, rest, physical comfort, reassurance or safety—and give it to her. If that fails, you can at least distract her away from her irrational behavior. Remember, you are much smarter and more resourceful than even the cleverest toddler, so use your advantage! Humor can be a great tool in such situations. A laughing child usually forgets to be cranky, at least for a little while.

As the parent, it is your responsibility to try to prevent certain situations from happening in the first place. If a child has missed his nap due to an event, is surrounded by excitement and new faces, or has been thrown off schedule for food and playtime, it is hardly his fault if a tantrum erupts at an inopportune time. Imagine how you feel as an adult entering a large party. Most adults will head to the bar to get a drink and look for a familiar face. These crutches of familiarity help relieve the anxiety and confusion of being in a new situation. Children feel the same way when thrust into a new setting. Being aware of these needs can help you prevent an outburst.

If your child has more than a few tantrums, you also need to consider what you or other key adults may be doing to trigger or perpetuate them. Have you inadvertently taught her that screaming is the best way to get what she wants? It's time to break that pattern by being clear that there are other ways of getting what she wants—“use your words”—and by making sure you are doing what you can to meet her needs. If she is insecure about when she will be fed next, she is likely to be whinier than if she trusts you to provide food nearly every time she's hungry. Keeping extra (healthy) snacks in the trunk of the car may help you give her confidence the next time she gets hungry. (Remember, feeding your child when she isn't hungry—just bored or emotional—can lead to obesity.)

You should also consider whether you are meeting his emotional needs, or whether your own problems are getting in your way. A parent with depression is

likely to have more trouble tuning into their child (and may also believe their child has more tantrums than they actually do), research suggests.ⁱⁱ If your child is frequently upset and you are depressed or extremely anxious, you should consider getting treatment, for his sake if not for your own.

Your temperament may be as important as your child's in managing tantrums. Perhaps you and your child have very different natural frames of mind, with one of you anxious and the other laid back; or perhaps your child's personality is much more like your spouse's—or your ex-spouse's. One study found that the children who are most vulnerable to the effects of negative parenting are also most likely to elicit negative feelings in their parents.ⁱⁱⁱ If you have this kind of destructive personality mismatch in your home, you may need to seek professional help.

Summary: Be on the lookout for things you may be doing to encourage your child's tantrums. Remember, she is the one throwing the fit, but you've set the stage she's throwing it on.

Chapter 5: Environmental Impacts

Children don't tantrum continuously. There's something that sets them off. Again, a little detective work can help you figure out what the triggers are.

Fatigue, hunger, frustration, need for attention, need for movement or overexcitement are the usual triggers for a tantrum. An unfamiliar, chaotic environment can produce problems for a child who thrives in a structured, predictable world.

As you already know, tantrums are most likely to happen where you would least want them to: the supermarket, the "quick" visit to your office, the middle of the street, the long car ride, a wedding, funeral, museum, restaurant, or preschool interview. It goes without saying that tantrums are most likely to occur when you are least likely to be able to intervene: when the parent is talking on the phone, driving, rushing to leave the house, gathering for a family photo, or attending a church, mosque, synagogue, or preschool event.

Your child will quickly sense any tension from you, throwing a fit right after you introduce him to the in-laws you were anxious to see again. Just as many adults talk about getting "stir crazy" when they sit at a desk for too long, small children can feel agitated when they're cooped up indoors with little opportunity to run and yell. And a new sibling with all the attendant emotion and confusion can result in regressive meltdowns. One-on-one attention with a parent can reassure the child that he still has Mom or Dad's undivided love and protection.

Challenging moments

Two-and-a-half year-old Bobby was all dressed up for the wedding: tiny striped shirt, pants, a bow tie and sandals. He was in a new city, staying in a hotel, and was surrounded with lots of excited strangers. His morning was filled with lots of activities on the beach, and his afternoon nap never happened. Now the wedding was about to start, and the family was assembling for pictures. First the sandals came off. Then his usual grin turned to a pout. As soon as “say cheese!” began, so did the kicking, screaming, hitting, and crying.

It is hardly surprising that this tantrum erupted at an inopportune time. A combination of hunger, overstimulation, anxiety, and fatigue set up the perfect storm. A planned babysitter in the wings could have been a wise solution.

Transition time

The lack of adequate transition time can trigger tantrums in some children. Transitioning from one activity or location to another can be a mine field. Children take their play seriously, and interruptions are unwelcome. A warning, such as “We have to leave in 15 minutes,” followed by five-minute updates can help prepare the child for the change. Suggesting that clean-up begin in advance warns her of the upcoming transition and teaches a child to be a good citizen. You can help by putting a few items away and recruit her playmate to set a good example.

There can be more than one reason why a child does not transition well. She may be enjoying her play and not want to stop. Or she may be dreading the next event such as going to school and separating from Dad. If it is just a matter of changing gears—play to car to school—then a simple five minute warning may be enough.

If, on the other hand, the child is fearful, a different strategy may be needed. One young child I knew vomited or nearly vomited every time she transitioned to school—every single day of pre-K and kindergarten. The five-minute warning simply escalated her dread until she became physically ill. Think of your own transition from the comfort of home with a hot cup of coffee into an icy winter morning, facing a cold commute to work. Most of us develop rituals to help us face our next activity.

Brainstorm ways you can help your child if transitions are particularly difficult for him. (Professionals, like your pediatrician or a child psychologist, can help you with you this, if needed.) Perhaps a small toy kept discreetly in a jacket pocket will be enough, but then be careful that the jacket isn’t left at home or washed with the toy in it! When she was in her early school years, one of my daughters loved wearing a watch. When she got upset at school, she could put her watch up to ears and the steady ticking calmed her down by reminding her of the ticking clock in her bedroom, one place she always felt safe.

Tantrum checklist

Fill this simple checklist out for each tantrum over the course of a week or two, to look for patterns:

Time of tantrum: _____

Location of tantrum: _____

Event just before the tantrum (i.e., school dismissal, waking up from nap):

People present just before the tantrum: _____

Amount of sleep the night/afternoon before the tantrum: _____

Time of last meal/snack: (Did he really eat it?) _____

Was there adequate time for a transition: _____

Has he/she had enough exercise today: _____

Was there an emotional trigger for your child (such as fear or overexcitement):

Is there an unusual amount of chaos or stress in his/her life right now? (new baby, divorce, family death, family move, etc.) _____

Are there any physical problems that could be affecting his/her mood? (Digestive problems, infection, pain, allergies, teething, etc.) _____

Were you feeling particularly stressed or bothered by something just before the tantrum? _____

Were you hungry or tired? _____

Have you been feeling emotionally fragile or needy? _____

Has your child successfully avoided a transition by throwing tantrums in the past? (in other words, are tantrums becoming a pattern?) _____

Summary: As irrational as they seem at the time, tantrums usually have some environmental trigger. Figuring out what it is and resolving it may make the tantrums disappear.

Chapter 6: Heading Off a Tantrum

Once you are reconciled to the fact that tantrums are the product of you, your child and your shared environment, there are some simple strategies you can use to prevent most of them. The main goal is to meet her basic needs for sleep, food, reassurance, independence, calm and safety, so she won't have to pitch a fit to get what she requires.

Next are some quick tips and then more detailed explanations of some common childhood needs and strategies for meeting them.

Tips for avoiding tantrums

1. For the under-two set, distract and redirect: "Oh, look at this light!"
2. Keep blood sugar stable: carry healthy snacks for snack time. Be careful though not to use food as a tool: some parents throw food at children like zoo animals.
3. Children do best with consistency: have some semblance of a schedule; children love predictability.
4. Avoid the overtired child syndrome: try to ensure a good night's sleep and consistent naps. Don't bring a hungry, worn out kid to the grocery store and then expect him to behave perfectly.
5. Avoid overstimulation: frequent crowds, parties, travel.
6. Pick your battles: if a child is at the end of his rope or you are, avoid conflict.
7. Be in control: you are in charge, not your two year old.
8. But if he's craving independence, give him a sense of control by offering some limited choices: "Do you want the red or the blue one?"
9. Don't give in to tantrums if it means breaking your rules: if he cries and you give in, letting him stay up later than usual, for example, next time he will cry and expect same result.
10. Some tantrums are unavoidable and do not reflect on you or your parenting: take a few steps away if you need to until the storm subsides.
11. Try to ensure that you and your partner are handling tantrums the same way.

Avoid hunger pangs

If low blood sugar makes your child cranky, bring healthy snacks with you to abort a meltdown. Be aware that obesity is one of the major health threats today so be judicious about giving snacks and be sure to offer healthy snacks that won't hype him up on sugar or chocolate (which is loaded with caffeine). Better yet, plan your shopping trips for a time when parent and child are rested and well fed.

Five healthy snacks to go

1. Raisins
2. Vegetable sticks or slices (may not be appropriate for younger toddlers for whom choking is a danger)
3. Apple slices
4. Cheese sticks or yogurt tubes (avoid the kinds that are loaded with sugar and food coloring)
5. Cheerios, cereal puffs or similar small, whole-grain edibles without too much sugar

Get enough sleep

Sleep is the number one topic for new parents. A sleep-deprived two-year-old (or parent) is a recipe for disaster. The sleep needs for children vary, but most need 10 to 12 hours of sleep at night. By age three some children start to give up their afternoon nap but this may vary from day to day. A missed, needed nap can make for

an unpleasant late afternoon and evening. A common issue for parents is getting their child to settle down at night. Two-year-olds are world champions at creating and extending the parental “to do” list. “I want a story,” is followed by “I want another book” followed by “I need water” and then “I have to go potty” and so on; the cycle repeats.

For bedtime, create a ritual including a reasonable number of calming, sleep-inducing activities. This does not include wrestling with Dad on the living room rug right before lights out. Stick to the ritual and after a hug and a kiss, it's lights out, “Good night.”

Five suggestions for making bedtime go more smoothly

1. Give your child a heads up when it's 10 minutes and then five minutes before bedtime. Do your best to keep bedtime at a specific time. Even if your child cannot read time yet, his body will adjust to the bedtime.
2. Set aside time for tooth-brushing and other bathroom needs, so she doesn't have an excuse to get up out of bed.
3. Change into pajamas, locate comfort objects like blanket and stuffed animal, and whatever else your child needs to get his/her bedroom ready for sleep.
4. Read a story or a few short books in a comfy spot with low light. Letting your child choose tonight's two books may help set realistic expectations and give him a sense of control.
5. Once you turn out the lights (with the exception of a dim nightlight if your child needs it), you might want to spend a few minutes talking about pleasant things, such as something good that happened that day or an upcoming event (as long as it's not too exciting and thinking about it will wake your child up). Consider singing a quiet song together, or taking turns making up short stories – tell the sillier ones earlier in the evening.

Understanding your child's exhaustion can make a big difference. Perhaps he needs some quiet time when he gets home from preschool, away from siblings and the chaos of dinner preparations. Or maybe a snack is in order, even if dinner is coming soon; think of it as his appetizer or hors d'oeuvres. It's particularly important not to put too many demands on a child like this, especially in the first hour or so after the school day ends. This is not a good time to try to show him off to work colleagues or to have to rush off for another event.

It may also be worthwhile checking in with preschool teachers to see if a noisy neighbor is keeping him from napping, or if he refuses what they serve for afternoon snack, leaving him starving at dismissal time.

A puzzled mother came to me recently for her child's well-baby checkup and told me of a disturbing event that happened to her thirteen month old. The baby had awakened from her nap screaming and proceeded to fuss her way through the hour. Nothing seemed to break the funk. Mom was puzzled as to what was wrong- was she ill, hungry, still tired?

It took me several years of motherhood before I recognized the post-nap funk as a distinct entity. Sometimes children will awake from their nap smiling and cheerful. But quite often they will leave dreamland in a terrible funk. It is worse if a child is awakened from a nap. Anyone with more than one child knows the hazards of putting a child in the car seat when he is due for a nap to pick up another child. Inevitably, on arrival the child who has fallen asleep in the car seat will be in a screaming rage when he is rudely awakened from his nap. But it is also common for a child to wake up from a nap “on the wrong side of the crib.” The child does not know why he feels so miserable, and there is little that those around him can do to help him. The best advice is to leave the child alone for a bit until he gets his sea legs. He will eventually come around once he gets reoriented.

But he’s so well behaved at school!

Four-year-old Joey was a star in his preschool. The children imitated whatever he did on the playground. He sat quietly during circle time and always helped to clean up after a project. After arriving home, however, he immediately started demanding juice, refused to wash his hands, and tortured his younger brother. Tantrums and crying soon followed.

Joey suffered from the “ticking time bomb syndrome.” Lots of young children have long days in daycare or preschool and are worn out by the time they come home. Certainly children can thrive in a long day away from home if the quality of care is good and the schedule is predictable. However, the energy required to “keep it together” for some children is enormous, and in some cases, it may be asking too much of a young child to keep it together in the evenings, too. The parent may be shocked to hear glowing reports from the child’s teacher since the school angel walks through the front door at home and immediately explodes.

The most important approach to Joey’s situation is first of all to understand it. Give him a little space to let loose and regress as long as he does not inflict pain and suffering on family members. After he has let off steam, had a rest and a snack, remind him that he needs to be a good citizen at home.

Avoid overexcitement

Overstimulation can also lead to tantrums. Think of the last time you went to an overcrowded store, amusement park or street festival. Weren’t you worn out at the end, just from the sheer stimulation? Whether it is the birth of a new sibling, an illness in the family, a visit with relatives, a birthday party, or an event outside the home, a young child can only process so much excitement. The initial racing around, laughter, and enthusiasm can quickly give way to tears and aggressive behavior. There is only so much input, the young nervous system can take; the emotional wiring is limited.

Celebrations involving young children should be limited in scope. Having one special friend over along with beloved grandparents too is more than enough excitement for a second birthday. One or two gifts are fine. Limit the sugar intake unless you want to ride the roller coaster that night. Anticipate that an event such

as a wedding, might be overwhelming for a two-year-old. Have a babysitter on call to do damage control if (or when) the meltdown occurs.

Tips for avoiding overstimulation

1. Talk about new, exciting events ahead of time in a calm manner so your child has some idea of what to expect.
2. Try to limit other schedule disruptions as much as possible around an exciting event. If your child has to miss naptime, for instance, try to make sure his morning is as normal as possible, and try to restore his usual schedule as quickly as possible.
3. If you see signs that your child is beginning to get overexcited—such as hyperactivity and silliness—this can be a prelude to a coming meltdown. Try to take him away from the setting for a few minutes to calm down.
4. Talk to other family members about helping you with these steps, so that your hard work isn't completely undermined by a doting grandparent or enthusiastic (and childless) aunt or uncle.
5. Bring objects like a favorite stuffed animal or blanket to comfort your child if she does get upset and to remind her of times when she is calm and feeling safe.

Get enough exercise

Children who have lots of energy may need physical outlets to help avoid emotional meltdowns. If you have a high energy child, be sure he or she gets outdoor time on all but the worst weather days. A backyard or even an indoor gym can be a great way to burn off steam. For one energetic daughter we hung a chin-up bar over a doorway (with a step stool underneath), and encouraged her to use it when she got antsy. If everyone's going stir crazy after a few hours of being cooped up inside, try turning on some music and holding an impromptu dance party.

Children who have physical outbursts when they tantrum such as hitting, biting, or kicking should be given outlets for their energy that can't be hurt. Punching a pillow or a mattress may provide a release.

A lot of physical activity may wear out some children and make them more prone to tantrum; too little may make high-energy kids stir crazy and in need of some action. Every child's stamina and need for activity differs, and you'll just have to figure out what works best for yours.

Conquer fears

Fear is a common cause of tantrums. The most horrific sound I have ever heard my child make—followed by a torrent of tears—was when a neighbor's barking dog bounded over to her. A decade later, her fear of dogs persists. If you're tuned into your child, you probably can distinguish a panicky shriek from a tired cry. It is important for your child to know that a caring adult will be there for them when they are afraid. Obviously, you can't protect him from every danger, but being calm and reassuring when he is panicky will help him tremendously. If he is high-strung,

you may have to do this repeatedly over years before he gets this message, but the end result will be a calmer, happier child.

Note: If your child's fears start to interfere with his life (his best friend has a dog that he is deathly afraid of), then behavior therapy may help.

Tips for conquering fears

1. Your physical presence, hugs and handholding will be reassuring for your child. This may be challenging for you, if you are uncomfortable with physical closeness, but it will be worth the effort both for you and your child.
2. For an older child, try talking through fears. If she is worried about being kidnapped (as my youngest was), talk to her about how safe your house is, and have her come with you to check the locks every night before bed. If it's bad dreams she fears, you could help her to make a dream catcher, a Native American totem that, tradition holds, catches bad dreams in its web.
3. Giving a child a sense of control can help them feel less fearful. Let her be the one to check the locks so she feels in control of her own safety (but don't make her responsible for such an important job, because that could heighten her anxiety).
4. Role-play. If he is concerned about a particular event—like a doctor's visit—acting out the event ahead of time can help him cope. He can use toys to act this out, such as having Teddy visit the doctor, or building a doctor's office out of Legos.
5. Read books related to the fear. This can help the child work through fears in a non-threatening way. The fascination many children have with dinosaurs, for instance, is a safe way of working through fears of giant monsters. (But make sure to remind him often that dinosaurs no longer exist!)
6. Deal with your own fears. If you're constantly warning him to "be careful" and acting fearful, you are likely to pass on your anxiety. If your life is governed by your fears, consider getting some professional help. Then you can be a role model for your child in learning how to conquer fears.
7. Be prepared to reassure her often. Fears, like tantrums, probably won't go away immediately. You will likely have to talk through the same fears and offer the same comfort multiple times before she gets the message and calms down.

Reassurance, attention and love

Kids differ in their need for recognition and support, but they all need some of it. Monkeys that grow up without affection fail to thrive, research has shown, and so do children. If the only way to get your attention is by wailing, she'll quickly learn that trick. If you are always on the phone or the Internet, if you don't take the time to listen to your child's stories from his day, if you aren't paying enough attention to notice when she gets hurt on the playground, you may actually increase his need for

attention. Try to make time every day to really check in with your child, understanding how he's feeling today, and what's exciting about her upcoming week. Listen to his jokes and stories; read a book together. It doesn't matter precisely what you do as long as the underlying message is that you care. Although you may initially do this to help your child, you may notice that the real benefit is for you. It's much more fun to be a parent when you take the time to enjoy your child. And the more fun you have, the easier it will be to take pleasure in each other's company.

The warm relationship you share will help her understand that you are there to protect her and that she doesn't need to throw a fit to get what she needs.

Minimize travel stress

When new parents ask me whether they can travel with their newborn, I usually suggest that they wait until after the baby is eight weeks old because the risk of infection in a newborn is not worth a trip. I then suggest that they quickly head off to India, China, California, Africa or wherever doting relatives live before the baby becomes a toddler. Travel during the second and third year of life is tough on parents and tough on plane mates. No matter how many snacks, games, and electronic devices you bring along, you can be sure the toddler will have a blood curdling, back arching, screaming meltdown at some point during the trip. An added attraction is the exorcist-like spewing that often goes along with the tantrum, covering the reluctant seat mate with all the snack food ingested. It is better to stick with "staycations" until the risk of an in-flight tantrum is minimal.

Another question I get asked frequently is, "Is it okay to sedate my child during the flight?" I don't believe in sedating children for convenience. If a child needs a painful medical procedure, sedation is appropriate. Giving Benadryl or other sedating medication to a child so that he will sleep during a flight is not a solution. Furthermore, some children have idiosyncratic reactions to these medications and instead of sleeping they may become hyperactive. It makes sense to plan the flight around naptime, but don't count on your child sleeping.

Summary: Anticipating and meeting a child's needs isn't spoiling them. It's helping them learn that the world is a manageable place, and that a little planning goes a long way.

Chapter 7: Giving Your Child Some Control

Many tantrums are pitched over control issues. One way to avert a tantrum is to give your child a small amount of the independence he craves. If you ask a toddler what vegetable you should serve for dinner, he's likely to be confused—he isn't yet sure what a vegetable is. Then if you try to feed him one he doesn't like, he may get frustrated or angry. But if you give him the choice between broccoli and green beans (perhaps showing him both so you're sure he knows which is which), he will be able to make a choice he's proud of. Little doses of power like that will fulfill his need for

independence without turning him into a tyrant or teaching him that his opinion doesn't matter.

Here are some other typical parent-child battlegrounds and suggestions for winning the war by willingly losing a few battles:

Clothing crises

Clothing can be a source of tension at a very early age. Battles over what to wear are usually made worse by the fact that they usually happen during the morning rush when everyone's sleepy and stressed. Strategic planning – or at least washing – can help give the child a sense of control over his wardrobe, if not his world. “Do you want to wear the red pants or green pants?” is probably a better question than the more open-ended “what do you want to wear?” For the child who insists on the same clothes every day (think Charlie Brown), you might want to buy a double of a favorite dress or shirt. You could show your budding fashionista how to layer clothes with leggings and sweaters so that her favorite summer sun dress doesn't leave her shivering come late fall. The same goes for children who want to dress up as their favorite super hero every day.

It's easy to feel embarrassed when your child is the only one at preschool who refuses to wear a coat and insists on flip-flops in the middle of winter. At a certain point, you need to pick your battles. Maybe he'll settle for Spider Man underwear, and not insist on the padded costume shirt. But if not, perhaps you can get over your discomfort knowing that his costume makes him feel strong and powerful. Which is more important, his need to feel in control or your need for him to wear more socially acceptable clothing?

Grocery store

Stores filled with tempting items are often a source of tension between parent and child, and a frequent setting for tantrums. As a parent, I found that giving a child relatively safe items to hold—like, say, a box of pasta—kept hands occupied in the store. At home, we might make a big deal out of her special box of pasta, serving it that night for dinner with some fanfare. Often, more than one item was needed to get through the long grocery store aisles.

As your child gets older, giving him some role on the shopping may help. “Do you want Cheerios or Puffs this week?” constrains the choices to ones you think are acceptable, but gives him a chance to express his growing opinions. “The blue yogurt or the red?” does the same.

Remember, that just as you may feel exhausted after coming out of a crowded store, she may feel over-stimulated or worn out, too. If it's not too hot to keep your frozen foods waiting a few minutes, or if your older children don't object too much, it may make sense to spend 5 minutes in the car after a busy trip, reading a simple book or just talking together about what you saw in the store. Giving her those few minutes of attention and calm may help avoid a tantrum later. It might even give her something to look forward to during the shopping trip other than a sugary snack.

Visiting the doctor's

Mary, an 18-month-old, was eying me sheepishly in the arms of her mother during a well-baby visit. Her parents and I had talked about her diet, elimination, sleep habits and developmental milestones, along with many questions about her inability to sleep through the night and refusal to eat any foods other than macaroni and cheese and goldfish. Trying to avoid eye contact with Mary during the initial discussion (a ploy that seems to take the pressure off a wary toddler), I realized that my best chance for success in examining her, was to have Mom hold her in her arms. Every time I approached her, though, the tears started, along with blood curdling screams and kicking. Mom and Dad hovered protectively trying to explain to Mary what I was doing and why it was important. While this approach might make sense for a three-year-old, a screaming toddler in full panic mode was not going to listen to reason. I rushed through the exam, doing what I had to do, but getting it over with as fast as possible.

The lack of control your child has at the doctor's office and memory of pain from previous visits is likely to make her fearful and then tantrum, sometimes even in the parking lot. Any way you can prepare your child for a difficult situation is helpful, such as reading books, or role-playing with a toy doctor's kit and a sick teddy bear. Mentioning shots before a doctor visit can backfire, though, since the anticipatory fear can overwhelm all rational talk. Expect the 15- and 18-month doctor visit to be a tear-filled one, and if it is not, be pleasantly surprised.

Books about going to the doctor's

1. "Going to the Doctor," by Anne Civardi
2. "Say 'Ahhh!': Dora Goes to the Doctor," by Phoebe Beinstein
3. "It's Check-Up Time, Elmo!" by Sarah Albee
4. "Doctor Maisy," by Lucy Cousins
5. "The Berenstain Bears Go to the Doctor," by Stan and Jan Berenstain

This emotional behavior in some ways is a sign of intelligence. Much like the Pavlovian experiments with animals where a dog was trained to get a piece of meat every time a bell would ring. Soon, the animal would salivate at the bell, whether the meat was there or not, so too, do savvy toddlers scream when they perceive the doctor's office where they were jabbed with sharp needles at prior visits. One can hardly blame them.

As a pediatrician I see many parents trying to cajole a reluctant toddler or two-year-old into quietly agreeing to an ear exam or shot. Once the young child decides he is not going to cooperate in such a situation, there are rarely words or bribes that can change his mind. In this case it is better to go about the business at hand. The toddler will quickly recover.

Bribing your way to good behavior

Setting up a reward system can be a simple way to help avoid tantrums, particularly in older children who can exert some control over their own behavior. We all respond better when we know we're working toward an important goal.

One of my daughters, then eight, really wanted to play the violin, but practice time turned into a battle of wills every night, often ending in tears. After some negotiation, she decided that she needed a bribe to motivate her to practice. We talked about several options, including small toys after a certain number of practices, which we tried for a while. She eventually settled on a plain tortilla—she liked to eat them cold, right out of the fridge. She still needed to be convinced to practice some nights, but the fights were over.

Bribes need to fit the child, the age and the circumstance. An appropriate reward for a three-year-old will probably not be the right one for a six-year-old, and one that works for one child may not work for his sister. Bribes should be used to set short or medium-term goals. Telling a five-year-old that her reward will come in college won't work. But giving her a sticker for every tantrum-free morning or day, and a small prize for every 10 stickers can be motivating. It may help to negotiate with an older child to come up with a fitting bribe, such as a new book, small toy or an hour spent together at a favorite place.

Rewards should fit the achievement. If you give him a bicycle the first time he gets his 10 stickers, you will create a major problem both for your bank account and for your child's expectations. Imagine a work colleague who expected a generous raise for every simple task she accomplished.

Avoid using food as a reward. Some tantrums can be prevented by making sure your child doesn't get too hungry, but food should be used for nourishment. Don't promise them treats if they quiet down, or they'll learn that eating is a good way to respond to emotional upset.

Summary: Your toddler is craving independence, but is terrified of getting too much of it. By picking your battles and consciously giving her control in some areas, you will retain your authority as a parent while teaching valuable lessons.

PART III: Moving Beyond Tantrums

Chapter 8: When to Seek Help

Tantrums normally subside between the fourth and fifth birthday, if not earlier. Your preschooler should be learning how to better control her feelings— what doctors call emotional regulation. If that learning isn't happening, if tantrums are getting worse, or if impulsive, destructive behavior is followed by meltdowns, it may be a sign of a deeper problem— either medical, emotional, developmental or situational.

Medical problems

Children with underlying medical problems can be emotionally vulnerable from pain, shortness of breath, sleeping disorders, or poor nutrition. For some of these, the first signs of a problem will be tantrums, so it is hard to tell what is going on.

Careful observation and a conversation with your pediatrician may be the best way to get to the bottom of emotional outbursts that have a medical cause.

One example that sticks in my mind is of Cally, age five, a whiny child who frequently resorted to tantrums, especially at the end of a long day. Her pediatrician noticed that she always had her mouth open—what’s known as an obligate mouth breather. Her speech was “hyponasal” and sounded like she was speaking under water. Her mom said she could hear Cally snoring all the way down the hall. Her pediatrician ordered a sleep study which revealed that she was waking up dozens of times a night because the adenoids at the back of her throat were swollen, blocking her breathing. She was sleep-deprived, which naturally made her cranky. Adenoids are an important part of the immune system, but when they are chronically infected, physicians will often suggest removing them in a surgical procedure called an adenoidectomy. Cally had hers removed and once she recovered from the surgery, she began sleeping well for the first time ever. She was much happier, was better able to focus in school and the tantrums went away.

Developmental issues

Children with developmental issues may cry extensively as infants or tantrum past the usual age range. Of course, babies can cry excessively for all sorts of reasons and developmental delay is just one possibility. If the child has an autism spectrum disorder, for instance, there will be other signs or symptoms, too, beyond emotionality, including poor social interaction, repetitive behaviors and communication challenges. (The first red flag for autism in young children is usually an inability to follow with their gaze when a parent points to something.)

Children with autism may be particularly prone to tantrums, because they are often more sensitive to and more easily overwhelmed by sounds, sights, smells and physical stimuli. Older children and adults with autism report that they can be completely derailed by the buzzing of a fluorescent light, for instance—a sound which most of us fail even to notice. Language delays can also add to a child’s frustration level and lead to tantrums. And many children with autism are in pain, but cannot express it or even identify what hurts. Sometimes, children who behave aggressively toward others or themselves have underlying medical problems, such as severe abdominal pain or other digestive issues. Addressing those problems will help resolve the tantrums as well as the pain.

Emotional or behavioral conditions

I find that parents instinctively recognize when their child’s emotional thermostat is off, and often express deep frustration to their pediatrician. “I don’t know what to do about Billy. We put him in time out and he just laughs.” “He hits his brother all the time.” “He gets in fights at school and then 15 minutes later, he is in a total meltdown, telling me he is sorry and that he loves me.” It is important to seek help for these children because their behavior can lead to frequent reprimands and punishment. Self image is damaged quickly, and the behavior soon becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. “I am the bad child who does bad things, and nobody likes me.”

This lack of emotional regulation can be a sign of depression, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), or oppositional defiant disorder. An evaluation by a psychiatrist or child psychologist can help identify if your child has a problem, and the best course of action.

Drama at home

If life at home is changing dramatically, because of a divorce or remarriage, a death or illness, a move, or the birth of a new baby, your child may backslide and tantrum more often. She may need more reassurance during this period of chaos in order to regain her emotional balance and control. Obviously, these are also times when it is particularly difficult for you to have time or emotional space for your child. Now would be a good time to call in a grandparent or other trusted adult to offer the child some extra love and attention until your family life stabilizes.

Divorce

As wonderfully as you may think you're handling your divorce, your child is probably going to sense your anxiety, and be stressed out by the change in status. If they are shuttling between Mommy's and Daddy's, that will add even more challenges, particularly if the rules and expectations are different from house to house. Young children won't have the vocabulary to express their confusion over all this change, so they may resort to tantrums. Again, these storms are not intended to get back at you for ending your marriage; they are just his way of handling the chaos and change. The best response is to make sure he knows that both parents still love him, even if they can't spend as much time with him as they used to, and that he is not to blame for the breakup.

Birth of a sibling

What to you seems like a joyous and miraculous occasion is to your child a dramatic loss of status. Instead of spending all your time doting on her, all of a sudden there's another creature vying for your attention—and usually winning. Imagine how you'd feel if your spouse suddenly brought home another husband or wife. Again, your child may respond to this change by throwing tantrums more often, and again, a great way to respond is to reassure her of her continued place in your heart and on your lap. It's a good idea to spend special time together without the baby, and enlisting his help doing age-appropriate chores, like getting a clean diaper or picking out the baby's next outfit, might help him feel a part of the new family dynamic instead of isolated from it.

Summary: If tantrums continue beyond the third year, get worse, or seem to be unprovoked, it's time to redouble your detective work. With the help of family, friends and professionals you can figure out what's going on with your child and get him the help he needs.

Chapter 9: Aging Out of Tantrums

If a tantrum is defined as an excessive emotional outburst characterized by verbal and physical energy bursts, then can tantrums extend beyond the early childhood years? Of course the weapons of childhood—screaming, crying and breath-holding—are innocent compared to the drugs, alcohol, cars and real weapons available to adult tantrumers. Although there is little scientific research on the subject, it seems obvious that children who are not taught to regulate their emotions become adults who cannot control their anger, sorrow and/or fear. A child who has not had limits set when young, can turn into a manipulative, demanding adult.

Tantrums in older children can be threatening enough that they are viewed as criminal behavior. In May of 2012, a six-year-old girl in Milledgeville, Georgia, was handcuffed and taken to the police station for a tantrum. A similar event occurred in 2005 in Pinellas County, Florida. While it's easy to say that the adults in these cases overreacted, clearly tantrums that are predictable and mildly annoying in a toddler can become disruptive and frightening in an older child. While the police intervention was way over the top, the adults in these situations clearly had no idea how to resolve the out-of-control behavior.

Many adult relationships are characterized by juvenile meltdowns and temper flares. One only has to view a TV reality show to view how spoiled adults behave when they don't get their way. While obviously these shows are somewhat scripted, I suspect the behaviors are fairly close to reality. Squabbling couples who throw household items at one another or scream and slam doors should remember that they are modeling behavior for their children.

Adults who have extramarital affairs are often acting out like willful children. "I want what I want when I want it," or "I deserve this" can be a script for an adulterer. While there are many reasons for infidelity, it can be characterized as emotional regression if done for revenge or out of poor impulse control.

Children who do not learn how to manage their emotions—whose parents don't teach them how to manage their emotions—are condemned to a life of anger and misery, both for themselves and those around them. Just as you make sure your child is learning how to read well, you need to ensure that she is learning how to control her anger, frustration and sorrow.

Also important to keep in mind: how you handle tantrums will change as the child ages. What worked when he was three probably isn't a good approach when he's eight. Parents must be flexible and creative in handling their child, adjusting to maturity levels and the child's needs. No one said parenting was easy!

Summary: Teaching your young child how to deal with or avoid overflowing emotions is a lesson that will benefit him—and people around him—throughout his life.

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