

Temper Tantrums

By Bernice Weissbourd

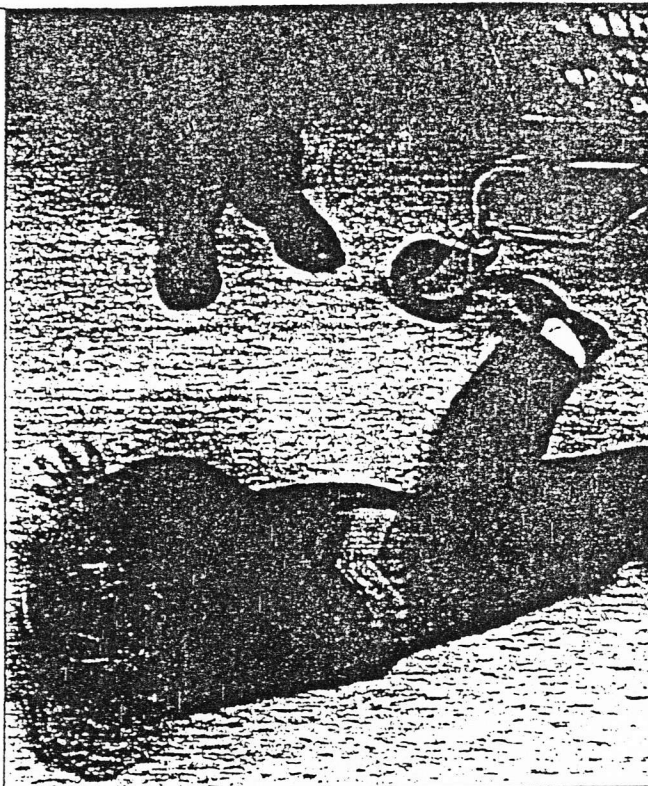
You may sit down, after it's all over, and wonder what triggered his temper tantrum. Your child was so upset and out of control that it was difficult to calm him down. You had given him a five-minute warning that it would soon be time to leave the playground and go home, but it didn't help. When it came time to go, he threw himself on the ground and screamed and kicked.

You stood there feeling helpless and angry. And though you know better than to spend time worrying about what other people think in such situations, you were nevertheless quite embarrassed.

It's a good idea to give yourself a chance to try to figure out what happened and why, and how both you and your child felt. It's important to keep in mind that temper tantrums at this age do happen, and, unless they are a frequent pattern of behavior, they do not mean that something is wrong with you as a parent or with your child.

A rash of new feelings. Two-year-olds are struggling with the issues of autonomy and control while at the same time they remain completely dependent on you for their care. They need you for everything—even to help them develop independence from you.

It is no wonder, then, that the child experiences moments of utter frustration. The exact incident that causes the explosion may be trivial,



Angry young man: A tantrum is the result of a two-year-old's pent-up frustration, which he cannot control or verbalize.

and certainly unpredictable, which means that it is not always possible for you to do just the right thing to avoid it. For example, it may be that yesterday, when you told your son that he couldn't have another piece of candy, he willingly accepted your limits and went on to other things. Today he vehemently protested the very same limits.

The temper tantrum is the result of his pent-up feelings. He may be tired and therefore have more difficulty accepting limits. He may be disappointed because the rain prevented him from going outside to play. There are a myriad of experiences that can make two-year-olds angry and unable to deal with their feelings or to control their behavior.

Setting limits. Your child needs you to be both firm and supportive. Giving in and letting him do whatever it was that caused the tantrum will only confuse him. He gains se-

curity from the boundaries you set when they are clear, understandable, and not too restrictive. If the boundaries become blurred, he feels less sure of what is and isn't acceptable and therefore less sure of himself and what is expected of him.

At the same time, the child is seeking your understanding and support. He needs to know that when he has lost control, you are there for him and will help him to regain it. If you meet his outburst with yelling or spanking, you lose the opportunity to model how to deal with upsetting feelings.

You can best help by remaining calm and in control. You may have to pick him up, screaming and kicking, and carry him out of the playground, saying, "I'm sorry you're so upset, but I told you it would be time to leave to go home. When we get there, we're going to make your favorite lunch." You won't be heard at first, but your actions and tone of voice will communicate that you are in command. Eventually he will calm down.

Tuning in. Sometimes it is possible, by knowing your child's patterns, to avoid a tantrum. He may be feeling especially tense and need a little extra attention from you. He may be excessively tired and unable to meet the ordinary demands of the day. He may be bored and need some new things to explore. By observing, you can tune in to the particular situations, times, and issues that trigger his outbursts and perhaps prevent them from occurring.

Your child's emotions at this age are up and down, and understanding that can make the outbursts less trying. A good hug and a kiss when a temper tantrum is all over will let him know that it was a tough time but you resolved it well together. ●



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