

MANAGING MONUMENTAL MELT-DOWNS

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“Crucial Mum Rule #1: When the children are already tired, hungry and grumpy there is nothing, absolutely NOTHING that is important enough to pop in to the supermarket for.”

I saw the above note posted on Face Book by a young mother and it made me smile. I think every mother in creation could tell stories of their most embarrassing moments in public places trying to either control, or run away and hide from, their screaming little wet noodles. Outbursts such as this are referred to as tantrums. They most often occur in children under the age of four years, but sometimes continue through teen years and into adulthood.

So what causes a small child to completely lose the plot? Dr. Michael Potegal, Ph.D., Paediatric Neuropsychologist at the University of Minnesota, has studied child tantrums for many years and he states that these outbursts are completely normal. He explains that the pre-frontal lobe (PFC) in the brain, which controls emotions and social behavior, has only just begun to mature at 4 years of age. Therefore, it stands to reason that children below that age cannot regulate their own emotions.

Without the ability to control their behavior or express themselves using words, toddlers become frustrated and their only recourse in getting attention is to act out. Their behavior spins out of control as they perform a variety of melt-down maneuvers such as screaming, throwing their arms, stomping their feet, hitting or biting and/or throwing themselves on the floor.

“Tantrums only last approximately 3 minutes on average and consist of 2 parts – anger and then whimpering sadness,” says Dr. Potegal. Uncontrollable outbursts can be fueled by anger or by anxiety. “Kids this age think magically, not logically,” explains Gina Mireault, Ph.D., a professor of psychology at Johnson State College in Vermont. “Events that are ordinary to us are confusing and scary to them. They don't understand that the bathtub drain won't swallow them or that their uncle can't really snatch their nose.” What resembles a tantrum is the child going into ‘fight or flight’ mode. The outcome looks similar and is often mistaken for an anger tantrum.

So, how do you manage uncontrolled meltdowns? Firstly, you have to work out what is happening and why. If it is a, “I can't say what I want. I can't get what I want; so I will scream until someone gives me what I want!” then here are some suggestions. If you are at home, then just walk away. An anger tantrum never works without an audience. If your child follows you, walk somewhere else. Just say, “I am not talking to you until you calm down.”

If you are in a public place where the 100+ decibel screams are causing annoyance to others, take the child to a quieter place. Sit them down. Get down to their level, take their hands firmly and make them look at you. Say quietly but firmly, “Jane/John, stop crying right now!” If they won’t stop, then stay with them, but do not soothe them until they calm down. Dr. Potegal states that soothing them in the angry phase of the tantrum is exactly what they want, so wait until they are at the end of it. They are more likely to listen to you now. Then tell the child that screaming is not acceptable and explain the behavior you expect. When they act as you ask, praise them.

It is vital that you evaluate the situation afterwards. Often we ignore the obvious signs. For example, we need to think from a child’s point of view before we go on some shopping expedition around mealtime or naptime.

The early years are the fertile learning years. Habits are very hard to break or change and it is much more difficult to control an older child when he or she becomes angry. If you, as a parent, have an anger problem, get professional help. If your child is unmanageable, do not expect the school to be her/his behavioral teacher. Seek advice from the school counselor and follow it through.

Anger is a legitimate emotion and it is up to us to teach our children by example and by explanation how to regulate their emotions. If you do not teach your child that tantrums are unacceptable they will become adults who throw adult tantrums and these are not pretty, or safe!

If you have any comments or questions on this subject, please do not hesitate to contact us at sally@forefrontfamilies.org. We invite you to also check out our website at www.forefrontfamilies.org and our blog site at www.forefrontfamilies.blogspot.com for further assistance.