A parent’s guide to...

tantrums

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FEW PARENTS ESCAPE THE EMBARRASSMENT OF THEIR CHILD HAVING A TANTRUM AT THE SUPERMARKET CHECKOUT OR ON THE FLOOR OF A RESTAURANT. IT’S ONE OF THOSE NO-WIN SITUATIONS WHEN THE TUT-TUTTING PUBLIC FOCUS ON YOU AND YOUR CHILD. SO, WHAT IS IT THAT TURNS YOUR CUTE TODDLER OR THREE-YEAR-OLD INTO A RAGING SPITFIRE WHO CAN’T BE REASONED OR EVEN PLEASED WITH? THE ANSWER, TO A GREAT EXTENT, IS LINKED TO YOUR CHILD’S DEVELOPMENTAL STAGE, WITH A FEW ADD-ON FACTORS SUCH AS TIREDNESS AND HUNGER.

LET’S BEGIN BY LOOKING AT DEVELOPMENT. THE CHANCES ARE THAT IF YOUR CHILD IS HAVING SERIOUS TANTRUMS, THEY WILL BE SOMEWHERE BETWEEN THE AGES OF 18 MONTHS AND JUST OVER THREE YEARS. (DON’T PANIC IF YOUR CHILD IS OLDER – WE’LL LOOK AT TANTRUMS IN OLDER CHILDREN NEXT MONTH.)

AGES AND STAGES

OF COURSE, THERE ARE ALWAYS SOME CHILDREN WHO START EARLY, BUT BY AND LARGE, THE SERIOUS TANTRUMS, WHERE DISTRACTION JUST DOESN’T WORK ANY MORE, USUALLY BEGIN AT THE POINT WHEN YOUR CHILD HAS BECOME VERY CONFIDENT WITH THE WORLD. AND IT’S A FRUSTRATING PLACE.

YOUR CHILD CAN NOW SEE AND OFTEN REACH INTERESTING THINGS. THEY NO LONGER BELIEVE THAT WHEN AN OBJECT IS PUT UP HIGH OR OUT OF REACH THAT IT HAS JUST MAGICKALLY ‘DISAPPEARED’. NOR WILL THEY BE FOBBED OFF WITH A TOY, A PEACE OFFERING OR A BRIBE. NO, YOUR CHILD’S BRAIN IS NOW SO DEVELOPED THAT THEY CAN KEEP FOCUSING THEIR ENERGIES AND ATTENTION FOR LONGER PERIODS.

CONCEPT MISMATCH

YOUR CHILD IS ALSO LIKELY TO BE MORE AWARE OF WHAT IS HAPPENING AND WILL BE KEEN TO COPY YOU AND THE WAY THAT YOU USE OBJECTS. TAKE THAT MOBILE PHONE, FOR EXAMPLE. YOUR CHILD WANTS TO USE IT, JUST LIKE YOU DO. IMMEDIATELY! AND, THAT’S THE OTHER SNAG. WHILE YOUR CHILD’S PHYSICAL SKILLS AND BRAIN HAVE DEVELOPED, CONCEPTS SUCH AS ‘LATER’, SAFETY OR POSSESSION HAVE NOT QUITE EMERGED. THIS MEANS THAT YOUR CHILD SIMPLY WON’T HAVE IT THAT THE TOY IN THE HANDS OF ANOTHER CHILD DOES NOT BELONG TO THEM, OR THAT IT IS NOT A GOOD IDEA FOR THEM TO PLAY WITH THE CUPBOARD DOOR.

YOUR CHILD MIGHT HEAR WHAT YOU ARE SAYING, BUT DOESN’T YET HAVE THE LANGUAGE SKILLS TO FULLY UNDERSTAND YOUR MEANING OR NEGOTIATE WITH YOU. IT’S ALL TOO MUCH FOR THEM. SO, WHEN THEY COME TOSSED UP OUT OF THE TEARS AND THE ANGER, NEITHER OF WHICH WERE PLANNED IN ADVANCE. THEY ARE JUST RESPONSES TO PENT-UP FRUSTRATION, WHICH MAY BE FUELED BY HUNGER OR TIREDNESS. THE LATTER PARTICULARLY AFFECTS YOUR CHILD’S ABILITY TO CONTROL THEIR EMOTIONS. SO WHAT ARE YOUR OPTIONS IN THESE MOMENTS?

WAYS TO RESPOND

I ALWAYS RECOMMEND TRYING A LITTLE DISTRACTION. YOU LOSE NOTHING AND WHO KNOWS, IT MAY JUST WORK, PROVIDING THAT YOU CAN ATTRACTION THEIR ATTENTION BEFORE THEY BECOME TOO FOCUSED ON WHAT THEY WANT TO TOUCH OR DO.

THEN IT’S A CASE OF DAMAGE LIMITATION. ACKNOWLEDGE THAT YOUR CHILD IS NOT HAPPY AND THAT IT’S HARD FOR THEM. THIS AT LEAST HELPS CHILDREN KNOW THAT WE ARE ON THEIR SIDE, EVEN IF WE CAN’T LET THEM HAVE WHAT THEY WANT.

WHAT YOU DO NEXT PROBABLY DEPENDS ON WHERE YOU ARE AND THE TEMPERAMENT OF YOUR CHILD. IF YOU ARE LUCKY, YOU MAY BE ABLE TO COMFORT YOUR CHILD, BUT IF THIS DOES NOT WORK, YOU MAY NEED EITHER TO PICK THEM UP AND PUT THEM IN A SAFE PLACE OR AWAY FROM PRying EYES, OR TO SIT BACK AND LET THE TORRENt RAGE.

THE KEY IS TO KEEP YOUR VOICE GENTLE AND STAY RESOLUTELY CALM. REMEMBER THAT YOUR CHILD DID NOT PLAN TO HAVE A TANTRUM IN ADVANCE, IT JUST HAPPENED. BECOMING ANGRY, THREATENING OR SHOUTING IS LIKELY TO ESCALATE THE SITUATION – AND ALSO TEACH YOUR CHILD HOW TO WIND YOU UP AND GAIN YOUR ATTENTION.

HOW LONG THE TANTRUM LASTS WILL OFTEN DEPEND ON YOUR REACTION, THEIR TEMPERAMENT AND HOW YOU HAVE DEALT WITH THEM – LIKE GIVING IN – IN THE PAST.

ONCE YOUR CHILD HAS CALMED DOWN, TELL THEM HOW PLEASED YOU ARE TO HAVE THEM BACK AND GIVE THEM A HUG. THEN LEAVE IT AT THAT. TRY TO FIND SOMETHING NICE YOU CAN BOTH DO, SO PEACE CAN REIGN.

Next month: tantrums in older children