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Dealing With Tantrums

Children with autism have been known to have a temper tantrum or two. Tantrums can be embarrassing, time-consuming, frustrating, scary, guilt-producing, and tiresome; but they are rarely dangerous. Think about why a child may have a tantrum. That's right, they work! Tantrums get children what they want, or they would not have them. What do children want? Candy, attention, Beanie Babies, not to go to bed, to continue self-stimulating, not to take medicine, more cookies, no more broccoli, and on and on. Children want what they want, when they want it. There are some things you can do to prevent tantrum behavior (e.g., teach children to wait) but that cannot help you when you are at Winn-Dixie with a screaming child! The best solution for a temper tantrum is a commitment from all people who have regular contact with your child to ignore the

Tools

temper tantrum and never give the child what he is tantrumming for as long as he is still having a tantrum. Here's how to do it and stay sane:

What Is A Tantrum?

A tantrum is a form of communication. It's a way for the child to say: "Look, parents and the whole world, you'd better give me what I want!" A tantrum is a normal reaction to frustration (not getting what you want) that has grown into a behavior problem. It is normal for a child to express anger when disappointed. Anger is a healthy response as long as it is expressed in a socially acceptable way. When a child expresses anger, our first reaction may be amusement. It's cute when a toddler gets mad. Their face frowns up, they say cute things, and they seem so pitiful. Our second reaction, unfortunately, may be to give in to them. This is when a normal anger reaction may turn into a tantrum. The child learns quickly that this tool they have just discovered is like magic. It gets the child what he wants. As time goes on, parents get angry too and begin to punish, ignore, yell, and,

eventually, to give in again. This is why many parents say, "I tried ignoring, but it did not work." You cannot ignore for a while. You must always ignore, in all situations, or it will not work. The child must learn that you will never give in to him when he is tantrumming. What happens when we ignore, yell, or punish for a while and then give in? The child has learned that for a tantrum to work, it must be loud and must last for a long time! To stop a tantrum, you and all who have regular contact with your child will have to agree to never give in to a tantrum. This is very hard to do! If you cannot commit to this, then stop reading now and find a way to enjoy the tantrums.

Planned Ignoring:

Planned ignoring is a strategy to deal with behaviors that thrive on attention. It is not to be used when the tantrum causes harm to the child, others, or property. To ignore the child harming self, others, or property would be teaching a behavior that is much worse than a tantrum. If your child is harming self, others, or property, ask the professionals working with you for another strategy. Here's how to

implement planned ignoring for tantrums:

1. Everyone who has regular contact with your child must agree to use this approach for each and every tantrum. If your child can understand you, when he is calm, tell your child that you will not pay attention to any tantrums (use words he understands) and that you will not give him what he wants as long as he is having a tantrum.
2. Whenever and wherever a tantrum occurs, it must be completely ignored. This means no positive or negative attention. The tantrum should be treated as if it did not exist and that it will change nothing for the good or bad in your child's life. Do not look at your child (except out of the corner of your eye to assure your child's safety). Do not talk to your child, correct your child, yell at your child, reason with your child, comment on the tantrum, or explain your actions to your child. Do not touch your child (except to protect him from harming himself, others, or property). Step over your child if you have to. No hugs, spankings, pats, squeezes, etc. Do not give your child anything to distract him, especially

the item he is tantrumming for.

3. Give lavish praise to other children for their appropriate behavior. Do not talk to others in the room about the child's tantrum. Talk to other adults about the news, sports, or weather. Focus on the other children or people in the room and what they are doing right. Also, do not ignore good behavior when it occurs at other times. When you see your child behaving well, sitting quietly, tell them so: "I like how you are sitting so quietly!" This will let the child know that you pay attention to good behavior, not bad.

4. If you are alone, occupy your attention with other activities. Read a book, call a friend (this may be a good idea as long as the friend will support you in your new, tough-love stance with your child - but do not call anyone who will convince you to give in), listen to music, watch television, sweep the floor, anything to distract you from paying attention to your child's tantrum.

5. When the tantrum stops (in the beginning, this may take a long time), wait a few moments, and then praise your child for the

next appropriate behavior. Do not discuss the tantrum and do not give your child the item or privilege he was tantrumming for until 30 minutes have passed. At that time it is appropriate to say: "Now ask me again for a cookie (or the item that set the tantrum off - if it is appropriate to have at that time)." Praise the child for appropriate asking and give the item, if appropriate.

When To Intervene:

If your child begins to hurt himself, others, or property during a tantrum, you must intervene. If your child is trying to hurt others, remove the others from his reach and give the others your full attention. Do not talk to your child while intervening. Continue to ignore the tantrum. If your child is hurting himself, remove any items that may harm your child or move your child to a safer place. Do not talk to your child and use only the amount of physical contact necessary to assure your child's safety. Make all your actions appear to be matter-of-fact. Treat the tantrum with as little attention as possible. Not unlike the way you deal with an unpleasant noise from outside

over which you have no control.

If your child was in the middle of completing a task for you when the tantrum began, ignore the tantrum but make sure the child completes the task, even if it means hand-over-hand help. For example, if you asked your child to pick up the toys and then the tantrum began, do not allow the tantrum to get the child out of the chore. Without talking to the child, help him pick up the toys and put them away. When the task is finished, walk away without praising your child, unless the tantrum stopped. You may also wait for the tantrum to stop and then have your child complete the task.

Getting Help:

Talk with supportive people who understand what you are doing with your child. Hopefully, you have a spouse, minister, friend, family member, and/or professional to share your progress with. This will help keep you on track and will help you deal with the strange looks you will get from people in the community who do not understand what you are doing to your child. Have someone else observe your ignoring to make sure you are not providing any

inadvertent attention to your child. Stick to the planned ignoring for at least one month before thinking about changing tactics. Behaviors that have been around for a long time will take longer to extinguish. If the tantrum behavior occurs again after it has stopped, apply the planned ignoring all over again. Your child must get the idea that tantrums do not help them or hurt them, they just get ignored!

Lastly, children with autism often communicate through their behavior. That may well be what is going on in a tantrum. You may acknowledge that you understand that the child is trying to tell you something but "you must use your words" or communicate in some other way. As long as the child is not tantrumming, give praise when the child uses his words. Also, make sure you listen, don't ignore good communication (get up and meet the need or request if it is appropriate - or explain why it is not appropriate). Often we parents get busy and put the child off for too long once he has asked appropriately for something. Show your child that appropriate communication is rewarded and honored. Don't

let your procrastination be the cause of a child's tantrum. May the Lord be with you.

~GJH~

Links of Interest

Taming Temper Tantrums

A very complete resource to taming temper tantrums of all sorts. Great insight into the causes of temper tantrums in autism. Great links.

Ignoring Inappropriate Behavior

More detailed information on how and when to ignore behaviors.

Please send questions, comments, & suggestions to: Gary J. Heffner.

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