



Responding to Tantrums

I would like to discuss an approach of dealing with emotional outbursts in toddlers. With children that have regular or severe tantrums, this approach will take time and patience, but it is proven to be effective. It is an approach that works just as well for older children and as a way to deal with conflict in adult relationships.

I hesitate to prescribe techniques, because that simplifies the situation and no one solution fits all families or children. Keeping that in mind, the following five step guideline could be used as “first aid” for emotional outbursts. Using the acronym SERVE, we can follow an easy to remember five step approach when confronted with a toddler having a tantrum or hurting another child. It is not a magic solution and will stop a toddler from ever throwing a tantrum again, but it should lead to the child calming down quicker and, over time, becoming better able to regulate their emotions. Other benefits for the child should be increased self worth, social skills, emotional intelligence, resilience and empathy towards others.

SERVE stands for: Safety, Empathic Listening, Repeat, Validate Feelings, and Exchange.

S E R V E

- 1. Safety**
2. **Empathic Listening**
Listen and try to understand WHY the child is feeling this way.
- 3. Repeat**
Repeat what the child is saying to let him know you are hearing him.
- 4. Validate Feelings**
Allow, validate it and name the emotions.
- 5. Exchange**
Offer alternatives for the behaviour.

A tantrum is a child’s way to react to overwhelming stress and frustration. It is a way to communicate what is happening inside of them. It may be a combination of tiredness, hunger, or simply frustration at not feeling understood. Small children communicate their feelings through their behaviour.

Adults may view tantrums as inappropriate and problematic behaviour, but for toddlers it is usually the only way they have at that moment to express themselves. This “inappropriate”



communication is the result of an underdeveloped brain and an overflow of stress hormones. The prefrontal cortex helps us predict the consequences of our responses and use logic to figure out the appropriate behaviour to get what we need instead. But this ability only begins to develop at around 4 years of age and will only be fully developed by our mid-twenties (around 21 years for women and 25 years for men).

Why do toddlers have tantrums?

There are many factors that could trigger a tantrum, some of which may be (Ockwell-Smith, 2014):

- frustration - they can't have something/do something – or indeed because they are made to do something they don't want to do;
- feeling unhappy/sad/insecure – perhaps after the arrival of a new sibling/house move/starting preschool;
- brain immaturity - they do not have an 'off switch' when it comes to flipping out;
- brain immaturity - they cannot calm themselves down/reason with themselves or understand the consequences of their behaviour, particularly when it comes to understanding other's feelings;
- because they can't cope with an invasion of their personal space;
- because they are not getting enough exercise/rough-housing/physical & messy play;
- tiredness or over-stimulation;
- because the adult with them has missed their early calls for attention/help;
- because they enjoy the physical sensation (particularly biting and throwing);
- parenting that is too strict, authoritarian and controlling with too many punishments;
- because they are modelling the behaviour of an adult (or child) close to them.

How should I understand a tantrum?

Firstly, we need to adjust our expectations of toddler behaviour. A tantrum is not a calculated move to get attention, or to spite you, or manipulate you. Rather, it is a way to express the overwhelming emotions that a small child is struggling with. And tantrums happen, no matter how good a parent or teacher you are.

What not to do

Do not give in, do not ignore, and do not punish. Dealing with tantrums in an empathic way does not involve "giving in", but rather involves being supportive of a child's emotional needs while maintaining boundaries and then teaching new methods of coping. Put simply, standing ones ground while acknowledging a child's feelings and providing love and support during a hard time are critical to a child's emotional development. Saying "no" does not mean you need to also deny the child understanding and comfort.



What to do instead?

1. Safety

Take a quick moment to make sure that the child, you and those around you are safe. Move the child away from other children if you need to. A child that is very upset may do something irrational like bolt away from you, throw an object or break something.

2. Empathic listening

The next step is to adjust your state of mind and become empathic. You are most probably experiencing your own overwhelming emotions at the moment: panic, anger, fear, resentment. Try to keep in mind that your child is suffering. According to Ockwell-Smith (2014) “they are not acting this way to give you a hard time, they are having a hard time!” They are not deliberate or manipulative. They do not hate you, they need you. They are completely overwhelmed and behaving this way for a reason and they need you to try to figure out what that reason is. For them to be able to calm down, they need you to be with them now.

Breathe deeply, listen quietly to what they are saying, and ask yourself: “**WHY** are they upset?” “What is behind this behaviour?” “What is the child trying to communicate to me?” Try to put yourself inside your child’s mind and think about what the reasons could be for them acting this way. What has triggered the tantrum? What are the feelings that they are experiencing?

Do not lecture or reason with the child. The child is flooded with emotion and the activity in the emotional areas of the brain (limbic system and right brain) is overriding the logical left brain. Just listen and communicate empathy. Communicating empathy and comfort is sometimes enough to diffuse the situation: get below eye level, give a loving touch, stroke the child’s hair, nod your head or give an empathic look.

3. Repeat

This is the golden rule of communication. When the child is upset, first listen without interrupting. Then repeat back what the child is saying or wanting. Children who are in the middle of a meltdown are incapable of hearing our message (our reasons, reassurance, distraction or warning) until they’re sure we understand and respect their message. So when the child is upset, before you mention your ideas, take a minute to sincerely describe what he’s doing and saying.

It is more important **how** you repeat the child’s words than your exact words. It is not helpful to simply parrot the words back to the child with a blank face. Mirror back the right amount of emotion. This is called “marked mirroring”. If you repeat the words with too little emotion, the child will not feel that you “get” it, if you react with too much emotion the child may be confused or frightened by your emotion. When we repeat what a child is



saying in this way it helps them to calm down and become more reasonable. This is because they feel heard and understood.

When you repeat, use only a few words or keep your phrases short. With very small children, it may take four or five repetitions before you even begin to get their attention. One sign that you are making progress is when they suddenly look at you, surprised that you are hearing them.

Example: If a child is crying because another child took his toy car, repeat what he tells you by saying “She took your car, she took your car.” After more crying: “Aww...she came and she took your car!”

4. Validate Feelings

Even if we don't like a child's behaviour, we should look for the underlying emotion and acknowledge and validate it. Don't dismiss how they are feeling and don't try to talk a child out of feeling how they are feeling. This usually leads to them intensifying the tantrum in order to make you “see” how upset they are.

Help the child to understand what they are feeling by **naming** their emotions, this will further help the child to calm down and will also help them to learn to understand their emotions. With time, as they age, validating their feelings help children to develop healthy emotional regulation and expression. They learn that they are allowed to experience emotion, that they can talk about it and communicate their needs with words, instead of exploding or throwing a tantrum.

Examples of how to validate feelings:

“I can see you are very angry that the girl took your car...”
“You are sad that it is time for us to leave and go home...”;
“You were so scared when the boy pushed you away...”;
“When he got onto your bicycle you became very angry...”;
“Of course we're scared/angry/sad/afraid!” and so on.

5. Exchange

It may be necessary to repeat the cycle of Repeat and Validate Feelings a few times until the child is calm and feeling better. Wait with this final step until the child is ready. It may not be the same day.

This step is where you teach the child alternative and more acceptable ways of handling the situation in future. If at all possible, involve the child in the process. From about three years old you could ask: if it is lunchtime and you do not want to eat your yoghurt with the other children, what should we do? Reframe the “no” into a “yes” with conditions. Emphasise the positive and think of creative solutions.

If there was hitting or biting involved, now is the time to say: “But you cannot hit her. We don't hit people, it hurts. But come to me when he takes your car again.” Or “Come to me



when you are angry with him again. Come and tell me and then we will make a plan together." Or "I want to hear when you are not feeling well/when you are angry. Come to me and tell me, okay?"

Example: "I can see that you are *so* tired, and you do not want to sit your car seat, but I have to fasten your car seat. We will be home in a short while. What will help? Will it help if I play you a song? You can choose a song for the ride back, what would you like to listen to?". Accept that sometimes a child is so tired or upset that they will continue to cry. Accept the crying. Tolerate the crying with empathy. It is not always possible to compromise, especially when it comes to safety. In this example you may continue to repeat and validate feelings on the way home, without taking the child out of the car seat.

Here's another example. You pick up your three year old child, Jane, from school and as she gets to the car she starts to cry about wanting a treat. You are sure that she is not hungry as she just had a sandwich at school. A typical interaction may look like this:

YOU: *(with empathy)* What is the matter Jane?
JANE: *(whining)* I want a KitKat.
YOU: *(bending down, stroking her back)* You want a KitKat?
JANE: *(crying now)* I want a KitKat Mommy! I really want a KitKat. Can we stop and buy a KitKat?
YOU: *(with empathy)* I can see that you really want a KitKat?
JANE: *(sobbing)* Yes.
YOU: *(rubbing her back)* You are very sad, I can see that your heart is feeling so sad.
(In your mind you wonder what has upset your child so much).
JANE: Yes, and I want a KitKat.
YOU: *(with empathy, stroking her hair)* You are sad and a KitKat will make you feel better?
Can I give you a hug?
JANE: *(snuggles into you, the wailing is getting less)*
YOU: I wonder what has made your heart so very sad?
JANE: Joey bit my hand today.
YOU: *(shocked, but without getting upset yourself)* Oh, goodness! Joey bit your hand?
JANE: Yes, look!
YOU: *(lots of empathy)* Aaaww...! Did it hurt?
JANE: *(most probably not crying anymore)* Yes it hurt a lot and I cried and cried and cried.
YOU: It hurt a lot and you cried so much. You were feeling very sad? My poor dear. I would like to take a very close look at it when we get home. I want to hear exactly what happened. Let's get into the car and then you tell me all about it. *(In your mind you know that you also have to pick up your other child from cricket practice so you have to leave now. In the car you can explore what happened and help her to think about why Joey did what he did and how he could have handled it differently. Ask her how she thinks he was feeling in that moment for instance to help her to also have empathy for his feelings, without condoning his behaviour.)*



If you continue to struggle, consider seeing me for an assessment or some support. Dealing with intense emotions can be challenging and it often helps to get a professional perspective.

Sources:

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