



Temper and Tantrums

Typical ways of dealing with conflicts with children.

When children can't get their own way, they may respond in various ways:-

- Tantrums - crying, screaming, hitting.
- Absolute refusal - verbal abuse, slamming doors.
- Sulking.

When confronted with behaviour like this, parents try different strategies to get the child to co-operate:-

- Explaining or reasoning.
- Distraction.
- Smacking.
- Making threats.
- Ignoring the tantrum.
- Shouting.
- Giving in.

This handout examines each of these actions and describes the advantages and disadvantages of each approach.

EXPLAINING OR REASONING.

With some children, explaining and reasoning may diffuse a difficult situation at the beginning of a confrontation, but generally this approach is ineffective. The more you try to explain or reason, the more the child will argue back. Consider the following situation:-

Child: Can I have another Kit Kat?

Parent: No, one is enough.

Child: Please, please, please...(whining).

Parent: No, if you have one now, you won't eat your dinner.

Child: Yes, I will. I promise I will.

Parent: Remember yesterday, you said you would eat your dinner if I let you have chocolate, and you didn't.

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Child: All the other children in my class get to have two Kit Kats.
Parent: I'm sure that is not the case. I've said 'No' (starting to get angry).
Child: You're so mean! You never let me have what I want.
Parent: That's a terrible thing to say.....

And so it progresses into an argument.

At a later time, give yourself and your child time to talk calmly about what the child did that displeased you. Avoid making this time a 'lecture'. Talk about what the child could have done differently. This should not be immediately after the event. Wait until things have settled down.

The other misunderstanding that parents may have is in believing that children think like 'mini adults'. Research shows that children do *not* think like adults. The moral development of a 3, 5 or 10 year old is quite different than an adult.

DISTRACTION

Distraction is an excellent method of avoiding problems getting out of hand, especially with younger children.

One difficulty, however, is that the distraction has to be **more interesting or more fun** than whatever it is that the child is demanding. Sometimes it is useful to keep some special activities or toys on hand, in case you need to use them to get out of a potentially difficult situation. Distraction will only be successful if it is used before the child is out of control:-

Mary is starting to cry because she wants to have another video on. Her father uses distraction by saying, 'Look Mary, let's get some bubbles to play with'

Some people worry that by giving the child something special to stop a tantrum or confrontation, they are rewarding the tantrum. This is generally not the case as the parent is not giving the child what they wanted

GIVING IN

Although parents know that if they say 'no' they should mean 'no', it is not always easy to stick to this. All parents give in at times, if you find that you are about to give in, get the child to do something for you before you give in:-

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Parent: *'Alright, you may have another Kit Kat, but hang your coat up first.'*

Or

Parent:- *'Okay, you may stay up to watch the end of the television programme, but go brush your teeth first.'*

Be sure that whatever you ask the child to do for you will be an easy enough task for him. You don't want to start another confrontation! You can imagine the trouble if the parent said:-

Parent:- *'Alright, you may have another Kit Kat, but go tidy up your room, change your clothes and put the rubbish out first.'*

One important consideration is that if you are going to give in, you need to give in early in the confrontation. (I know that this is easier said than done). Parents say to themselves 'Why didn't I just let him have his way earlier!' Unfortunately, if you give in when the confrontation is nearing its peak, the child learns that next time, he will get his way more quickly if he starts his misbehaviour at a more intense level.

SMACKING AND PUNISHMENT

Unfortunately, punishment *does* work in the short term and is therefore very tempting. In the long term, however, there are very serious difficulties with it:-

The child imitates; If the child sees the parent smacking, the child will copy it. The child will probably hit other children to get what he wants.

The child does not learn; Smacking and other punishments teach the child what not to do. It does not help the child learn what they should do.

It increases; If punishment is used regularly, the parent will find that they have to use increasingly severe punishments. If the punishment is in the form of smacking, the parent would find that he has to hit the child harder to make the child appear to be sorry for what he had done.

The child gets used to it; If punishment is used frequently, the child becomes used to being punished. In fact the child will start to challenge the parent by saying things like 'That didn't hurt!' or 'I don't care!'

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The parent's feelings Often smacking is used when a parent has lost control or doesn't know what else to do. Afterwards, the parent feels guilty or upset that they did not know how else to handle the situation better.

The child's feelings; Parents who use physical punishments on a regular basis often think that they are teaching the child to 'respect' them. This is not the case. Frequent punishment will only make the child resent and fear the parent.

Power versus negotiation; Physical punishment teaches children that the way to get others to do things is by using power and force. The child does not learn how to use persuasion or negotiation.

Giving attention to 'bad' behaviour; By punishing a child, you are giving attention to behaviours that you want to stop. Research shows that the more attention (even negative attention), that a child gets for a behaviour; the more likely it is that the behaviour will increase or get worse.

Shouting; Most parents shout at their children, thinking that it does no harm. Like smacking, it often works in the short term, but it does not work in the long term. Look at the list of problems associated with smacking. It all applies to shouting.

IGNORING

Many parents are advised to ignore minor misbehaviours such as whining, pestering, shouting or tantrums. Most parents will try this but they find that it does not work.

The reasons for this are:-

Ignoring is very difficult to do. It means not speaking to your child, not looking at the child and keeping a neutral expression on your face. Trying to ignore a behaviour in front of friends and relatives is nearly impossible. If a behaviour has been done to get a reaction and the parent then starts to ignore it, then the behaviour **will probably get worse before it gets better**. Parents find that they are unable to continue to ignore when the child's behaviour has escalated.

You cannot ignore serious misbehaviour that involves physical aggression or serious damage to property.

To understand the difficulties with ignoring, think of the following scene:-
You decide that you would like a cup of coffee from a vending machine. When you put in your money, it does not give you your coffee (in other words it

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ignores you). You press the 'return' button, but nothing happens. What do you do?

You will probably kick the machine and shake it! In fact, your behaviour gets worse before you finally give up and walk away.

The next day, you go by the same machine. If you are very thirsty, you may try putting money in the machine again. If the machine ignores you again, you might still kick and shake the machine, but will walk away sooner than you did on the first day.

If you ignore misbehaviour, it **will** stop, but you have to ignore the behaviour every time it occurs. Imagine if on the fifth day, the coffee machine suddenly gives you your coffee when you shake the machine. You will have learned that if you kick and shake coffee machines long enough, you will finally get your way!

ACTIVE IGNORING is a technique that enables parents to tackle minor misbehaviours effectively. It is done by **telling** the child that you are not paying attention or by **doing** something that shows you are not paying attention.

(If the coffee machine has a sign on it that says it is ignoring you e.g. 'out of order', you will stop kicking it much more quickly than if the sign were not there)

Examples of active ignoring are: _

Saying 'I don't listen to children that whine'.

Looking out the window and talking to yourself while the child is having their tantrum.

Saying 'if you keep pestering me to buy that toy, you will **definitely** not get it'.

With active ignoring, it is important to pay attention to the child **as soon** as his behaviour changes. You do not necessarily have to give the child what they wanted, but it is important to acknowledge their better behaviour.

For example:-

'I am glad that you stopped whining, I am sorry, however, you still cannot go outside'.

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THREATS

Threats are usually ways of trying to force the child into doing what you want.

They may involve:-

- Removing something they are very keen on.
- Telling someone about the child's behaviour such as a teacher or a grandparent.
- Stopping them from doing something that they are looking forward to.

The problem with most threats is:-

They are often not carried out. For example, a parent may threaten a child by saying they can't have any sweets for a week. In the end, the parent either forgets what they said or they feel sorry for the child and give in, usually saying something like ' You can have them **this** time, but next time I will really mean it.

There is usually a time delay. For example, before school a parent may say to a child that they will not be allowed to watch their favourite television programme that evening. What will the parent do if the child's behaviour is extremely good when they come home from school? Should the parent still carry out the threat? If they do, then the child will feel that life is unfair and that it is not worth being 'good'.

What CAN be used instead of these methods?

Try to notice good behaviour instead of focussing on the negative.

Praise and reward your child whenever he is co-operative and helpful.

Use 'Active Ignoring' with young children.

Learn about using **Warnings and Consequences** with older children. Using **natural and logical consequences** are an excellent way of teaching children to behave in a more responsible manner.

Give yourself and your child time to talk *calmly* about how you would like the child to behave. Be sure not to make this sound like a lecture though!

Acknowledge how the child feels and encourage the children to find their own solution to some of their problems.