

Timeouts & Tantrums: Are We There Yet?

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Dealing with Timeouts and Tantrums

Who *Are* These People? Your child is sobbing and screaming in a puddle once again... Boy, do I know how maddening that feels as a parent! It brings to mind a comment I once heard by a stand-up comic, that working with little children is like being with “brain-damaged people.” What is wrong with these people? They are unreasonable, irresponsible, illogical, highly emotive, and self-centered. Let’s get a timeout!

Maria Montessori’s perspective is our rescue when it comes to this problem, because she reminds us that children are different from us in numerous ways, and not only must we respect this, we must understand and take their developmental needs into consideration.

The child’s purpose is to build a human being. They are in the process of developing – not fully formed as we are. If we can really wrap our minds around this point, it can guide us in our approach. Ultimately, our children will not only be relieved by having their needs addressed and their development supported, but we will enjoy our time with them much more.

The Discipline Dilemma

When it comes to “discipline issues,” it is much harder to be a parent than it is to be a Montessori teacher: The classroom environment is designed specifically to meet the needs of the children who enter it; our homes are designed for many other purposes and for more people with differing developmental needs. When children misbehave, the teacher does not take it personally, she can see the behavior objectively and in context, and she is there with a “present” mindset; parents have a ringing phone to answer, a dog vomiting on the floor, dishes piled in the sink, a wallet to locate, and children of different ages to herd into a car with the clock ticking in her head. Oh--and she takes things personally.

Then, along comes the pediatrician’s advice to put a misbehaving child into a timeout – one minute in a chair facing the wall for each year of the child’s life – or some other punitive quick-fix. The problem is, even if these reactions work in the short term, they are often causing more problems in the long run. And much of the time – just ask around – they do not solve the problem at all.

A Different Perspective: Our Montessori Framework

Montessori does not give us direct instructions on discipline issues, for two reasons. First, there's the famous, "it depends..." (on the child's personality, development, history, the events leading up to the moment,) and second, parents must turn to their inner guide when it comes to finding the best answer, (following advice only if it fits your situation). Montessori was a proponent of inner freedom and individual choice, and this extends to how we should respond in certain situations. However, Montessori does give us all that we need to find the answers:

- A fundamental realization that the human being forms himself, and that he goes through developmental stages. When the developmental needs are met, the child succeeds in forming himself.
- Our adult role is to create an environment that meets the child's needs. We must continually adjust the environment as the child's needs change. We can do this by understanding – basically – what those needs are, and altering our homes and routines to meet those needs as best we can. (Alert – not always possible! Cut yourself some slack and do the best you can).
- The respect that human beings all need a balance of freedoms. By "balance," I mean that freedom must come with boundaries. Both the freedoms and the boundaries are decided by, and enforced by, the adult.

So, first we begin with these concepts. Set up the situation – let's say it's getting breakfast and preparing for school in the mornings – with these three things in mind. For example, set up your kitchen so that your children can get what they need for breakfast and clean it up fairly independently. Show the children how to do things for themselves as much as possible, then step away to take care for your own needs so that the children can have space to try things out. The routine should be consistent enough that your children know what to expect. Provide some freedoms within boundaries – such as a choice of two things they could make for breakfast. Setting the stage for success in this way helps your children to manage themselves to the best of their ability.

Then Comes the Blow Up

Even when you have followed this example, however, we all know that children have their challenging moments. When your child gets upset, first take a long, deep breath and stand still for a moment. Much of the time, stress expressed in a tantrum has to do with a build up of emotional frustration, and adding your own to the situation just makes it worse. Be the leader – see that she is suffering and stay calmly objective as best you can. Children often just need a little compassion. It's amazing how effective a spontaneous hug, a sympathetic sound, or some silent assistance, can save the day. Your attitude of acceptance – self- acceptance first and foremost – is the best way to put things back on

track. This does not involve a lot of talking, reasoning, or questioning. Just give the hug, make the sound, or lend the helping hand. This is probably what you would want someone to do for you when you're at your wit's end, so try to model that example.

There are times, to be fair, when the "tantrum" involves unacceptable behavior, such as hitting a sibling, breaking something in two, screeching at the top of one's lungs in a restaurant or throwing oneself on the floor of the supermarket. In such cases, a hug may not make much difference. This is when a swift removal with a sympathetic sound is effective. The time for young children to experience that the adults are in charge is while they are still small enough to lift and carry. By taking action, you are supporting your child with a loving boundary. When your child finds your boundaries consistently, he or she will gratefully stop searching for them. In normal circumstances, children who throw tantrums regularly are typically just trying to find boundaries. Once they find where they are, they move on to other interests.

The best remedy is avoiding situations where you just know a tantrum is likely: when a child is overtired, over-stimulated, underfed, dehydrated, overly stressed, given too many freedoms without boundaries, or given too little opportunity to do purposeful things. When my children were little, I found that things went most smoothly when I kept in the forefront of my mind, the fact that my children are forming themselves and have an inner drive to do so all the time. This meant that when we walked into a supermarket, my goal was to employ them in as many actions and decisions as reasonably possible. I asked my four year old to go find two zucchinis and my one year old to carry the bag of carrots, for example, keeping them busy and thanking them profusely for every helpful action.

As you reflect on the times leading up to a tantrum, think whether the above supports were in place and adjust for next time if not. Sometimes we can make an adjustment in the moment. Perhaps you realize that your child is tired or that the task is too frustrating. Or maybe you are micromanaging your child, undermining his small decisions, attempts and judgment of his own work. (We tend to do this when we are tired!)

The "Three D's" that Make Timeouts Tempting

When a behavior is one of the Three D's: Destructive, Dangerous or Disrespectful, you do need to respond swiftly and without hesitation. This is about protecting your child, others, or objects in our environment. Realize that it's your job as the adult here to step in immediately and do the protecting. It isn't good for a young person to build habits of destructive, dangerous or disrespectful behavior. We want positive, productive actions to override. In order to act with compassion, you can even say out loud, in a pleasant voice, "Ah, I can see this

isn't a good time for this... It's OK – we can head home.” Then don't negotiate, re-explain, or get agitated. Just pick your child up and walk out, and know you are doing the right thing. You are doing your job as a parent. Feel good about it. Don't beat yourself up with unnecessary doubts and dialogue. It's *fine*. All children do this. We make misjudgments about how our children are feeling or how they are going to behave, all the time. It's normal. We can't always know how they are going to feel, and neither can they. Be accepting. Relax. Enjoy some nice music on the drive home and look forward to your bath or whatever you plan to do when you've gotten your little one into bed. If he screams the whole way home, you be the rock of compassionate calm.

Apart or Together

In a classroom, we Montessori teachers bring a misbehaving child near us to sit for a short time, where he can watch the interesting things we are doing with other children and observe all the wonderful opportunities in the room for activity. Typically, after just a few moments of sitting next to his teacher, a child will want to get busy again. Instead of a timeout, it's like a reset, close to the presence of a caring, firm, busy adult. I say “busy,” because the point is not to allow a misbehaving child to monopolize your attention by misbehaving.

You can be calm and cheerful and sit where your child can be near, but not interfere with what you are doing. This way, you provide the support he may need to get back on track. Because children prefer to be active, they often respond well to being allowed to get involved again in some purposeful activity.

In the classroom or at home, a child may actually choose to be alone to calm himself down. The behavior may be the result of not feeling well, being overly tired, or agitated. He may opt to go to his room and be alone for a while, sit in a quiet corner with a book or lie down in another room at home. This is a healthy sign that your child is soothing himself and learning coping techniques. When a child removes him or herself, it is a welcome and healthy sign of growing self-awareness and self-control.

In the worst situations, is it OK to put a child in her room or tell her she must leave a common area where she is causing disruption? In my mind, yes. I cannot imagine how any society survives if we do not have this last resort to go to when absolutely necessary. Dr. Montessori believed, “A child's liberty must have as its limit the interests of the group to which he belongs.” In other words, to be in the desired company of others, we must all develop the self-control to be courteous and move about with respect for other people's physical and psychological space. You give your child what he needs when you provide the limits of society with love and compassion. If you do not provide these limits now, the world will provide the limit later without love and compassion! As one person wisely once

told me, “You can parent your children when they are young, or you can attempt to do it when they’re in their twenties; it is a *lot* harder to do it when they are in their twenties! And amazingly, you do have to parent them eventually. May as well get it over with when they’re young!”

I am now the parent of adolescents, and I still work with this framework of looking for how to encourage my children to contribute with purposeful actions, offering freedoms and providing supportive boundaries. I try to create a home environment and routine that best meets their developmental needs and respect that our children are the ones forming themselves, not my husband and I.

Dr. Montessori made some great discoveries by watching children very carefully and seeing what they were actually trying to attain in their behaviors. Montessori saw that the child’s quest is to develop self-discipline. She said: “The discipline we are looking for is active. We do not believe that one is disciplined only when he is artificially made...silent... and... mute. We claim that an individual is disciplined when he is the master of himself and when he can, as a consequence, control himself when he must follow a rule of life.”

This is the ultimate goal – that our children make choices that bring them closer to community, not farther away from it. What disturbs us about timeouts and tantrums is that they perpetuate isolation from the group. With strong compassion, supportive boundaries, and sensitivity to our children’s developmental needs of the hour, parents can help children to find their best selves so that they can join in and contribute to society with joy.

For more ideas on childrearing, one of our favorite parenting resources is Love and Logic, by Jim Fay.