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*Listening to Children*

# Tantrums and Indignation



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### A New Set of Assumptions

Most of us who are parents measure our competence in a very straightforward way. When our children are happy, cooperative, loving and polite, we are able to take pride in our parenting, and in them. When our children are unhappy or unreasonable, we either blame ourselves or we blame our children. We tend to operate on a widely shared assumption that children's upsets are bad. With heavy persuasion or force, we pressure our children to be good again, because we don't want to feel like bad parents with bad children.

There is a fresh approach, however, that relieves mothers and fathers of the unpleasant and difficult job of trying to make children be good. It is based on these generous but well-founded assumptions:

- **Children are naturally easy-going, loving, cooperative and eager to learn.**
- **Children's good nature can become clouded.**

When children are sad, frightened, frustrated, embarrassed, or when they feel alone or unappreciated, their good nature can be obscured. Such tensions pull a child's behavior off track, away from trust, cooperation, and enthusiasm.

- **Hurt feelings confine a child to unloving, fearful or inflexible behavior, which is a clear request for help.**
- **A child who is upset or inflexible will recover from his feelings of hurt if a caring adult moves in warmly and listens while he expels his upset.**

Parents who adopt this new approach to troublesome times soon find that a child's upset, which once seemed to indicate a serious failure, now simply signals the need for some listening. A parent's gentle attention encourages the child to feel the upset fully. With great energy, he will cry, have a tantrum, tremble, or laugh until he has shed the feelings that drove his judgment off course. Children's emotional outbursts are a natural recovery process that restores their ability to relax, love and learn. We have found that children whose deep feelings are listened to develop confidence in their own strength and intelligence, and confidence in their parents' love. Hope and affection spring from a child's heart after his noisy, vigorously unhappy feelings have been shed.

In particular, frustration is a common trouble that besets anyone who is eagerly learning new skills. Children approach learning with an "Of course I can do it!" attitude, and a real passion for success. Their ideas of what they want to do are grand, yet children's abilities grow only through the messy process of trial and error. Feelings of frustration are an everyday glitch in the learning process, a natural result of the clash between what children expect and what they are able to do.

## **Frustration Clogs the Learning Process**

Frustration is a perplexing foe of learners of all ages. We all know how it builds: a child can't make things go his way, and, to his credit, he won't give up trying. Eventually, he loses his ability to come up with new approaches. He wants to succeed, but can't figure out how. He feels like jumping out of his skin. Suggestions from a well-meaning adult won't help, because the child's feelings have overwhelmed his ability to think. At this point, if tantrums are forbidden, the child must abandon his attempt to learn. Frustration will bristle like a porcupine every time he faces similar situations or similar learning tasks.

## How Children Recover from Frustration

When a frustrated child feels safe, he begins a tantrum, the recovery process that expels frustration. Bursting into lots of noise and motion, his body becomes hot, and there may be tears and perspiration as well. A child will often throw himself to the ground, arms and legs flying, or push himself against an immovable object and keep pushing to no avail. Tantrums are not usually directed at anyone in particular. They are not mean-spirited or spiteful. The child's outburst will be a lively release of tension that ignites in an instant.

Tantrums aren't a pretty sight to most parents, but you will come to appreciate them when you see how deeply they relieve your child. Most of us have never seen a tantrum restore a child's ability to think and learn because we are surrounded by people who become angry or threatening when children show their feelings. We've been taught that children are not supposed to have tantrums, although every healthy child tries again and again to relieve frustration in this way.

A tantrum doesn't necessarily mean that anything is wrong with you, the situation, or your child. Repeated tantrums in similar situations, though, might mean that inappropriate expectations or limitations are being placed on your child's behavior. For instance, expecting a young child to do a round of shopping without touching anything is bound to result in frustration. Young children can't quell their instinctive desire to learn, and they learn by touching. Even when our expectations fit our children well, they are bound to become frustrated at times. Their hopes and ideas outreach their abilities. Tantrums are the way children face that frustration, get rid of it and return to a satisfying life.

When we allow a child's tantrum to run its full course, he is freed from the tension that clogs his learning process. A frustrated child makes the same mistakes over and over. He cannot accept help from anyone. After a healthy tantrum, a child relaxes and returns to the joys of learning and cooperation. Tantrums play an important role

in keeping children hopeful about their ability to learn. Given this outlet, they don't have to walk away from challenges whenever the learning process becomes difficult.

## Listening to Your Child's Tantrums

You probably can think of several situations that regularly frustrate your child. Sometimes it's an event that triggers the upset, such as being strapped into the car seat, having little brother barge in on a game, or being asked to draw something for school. Sometimes tantrums seem to be connected more to a time of day than to one particular kind of activity. For instance, coming home after day care or leaving home in the morning can be touchy times for children, because they don't have much say in what happens at these times. After you've identified these times or activities, prepare yourself. Rather than hope that this persistent trouble has disappeared overnight, decide that it will probably erupt, as usual. When your child becomes edgy, move closer. If he is close to giving up on a frustrating effort, gently support him to stay where he is. Quietly, gently help him face how awful he feels.

Sometimes, the beginning part of listening to a child's tantrum involves deciding not to placate your upset child. If your child has chosen one dress to wear for school, but starts a tantrum when you try to put it on, you might ask her what other dress she wants. If she starts to fuss about the second dress she chose, you can be sure you have a child who is seeking the relief of a tantrum. All you need to do to help your child recover is to stop finding dresses. Gently say, "I think you'll have to choose one of these dresses you picked out." This gives her permission to begin.

Listening to your child's tantrums isn't much different from listening through a good cry, once you get the feel of it (see the pamphlet *Crying*, published by Hand in Hand). It's simply the thunder and lightning side of a child's internal weather system. Here are some general guidelines.

- **Stay close to your child, but don't try to comfort him.**

A tantrum is full of noise and movement. Your child will become very hot and may perspire heavily. He needs to writhe, wiggle, and throw himself around to get the frustration out of his system. You can be safety manager, making sure that he doesn't bump into anything as he proceeds. All that stomping, noise and struggle with unseen forces is helping him recover from the insult of not being able to make his own ideas work. You know the feeling! Let him move.

Most tantrums are relatively short. You might expect to listen for five to fifteen minutes. Once it is listened through, a tantrum clears rapidly, perhaps with some giggles and warm affection between child and listener. This transformation of your fallen-apart child into a gently reasonable person is one of the real wonders listening can produce. He will often gain a large store of patience that you'll appreciate during the following hours or days.

- **If you are in a public place, you may want to carefully carry your child to your car or other more sheltered spot to ride out the storm.**

Children tend to have tantrums in public. This may be because the parent's attention has been drawn to the mechanics of organizing things and getting there. By the time they arrive, the child feels separate and off-kilter.

Often, it's worth the trouble to carry your writhing child to a less public spot, so you feel freer to handle things thoughtfully. If you have no car nearby, the delivery side of the grocery store, the less popular underwear and socks section of the department store, or the front steps of your temple or church may have to serve as a makeshift refuge while your child works things through. Ask for help if you need it: "Would you move my grocery cart to one side? I'll be back in a few minutes." If you can manage it, a touch of humor helps: "Looks like we have technical difficulties! I do want to buy these sheets: I'll be back when my friend here feels better."



Most onlookers will be glad that you look like you know what you're doing. In fact, most onlookers have at one time or another faced the same situation you are facing. Don't worry too much about them.

One parent I know, caught by a full tantrum in a crowded downtown toy store, had no good place to go, so he walked the streets carrying his wriggling, yelping child for the ten-minute duration. His wife, embarrassed by the commotion, walked half a block behind them. When it was over, they expected their two-year-old to be tired and cranky, as was his usual habit early in the afternoon. They dared to enter a coffee shop for lunch, where their son charmed the waitress and sat, contented and alert, through a peaceful meal.

## Indignation

Another emotion our parents had little tolerance for is indignation. It's sometimes hard for us to distinguish between frustration and indignation, because both are loud and both are beyond the boundaries of good manners and self-control that were drawn for most of us. Indignation is a spontaneous, healthy response to injustice. It is one of those culturally forbidden expressions which, when understood and listened through, will serve both your child and your family well.

Sometimes, our children have good reason to be indignant about the treatment they receive from us, other adults, and their peers. Disrespect for young people is widespread in our society. When confident young people are wronged, they will heatedly protest. Their response is immediate, fresh, loud, and not aimed to hurt anyone. They aim to be heard and to set things right. An indignant child will tell you (or someone else) in no uncertain terms what he thinks was thoughtless or unfair. "Don't you talk to my brother like that! You're being mean to him. Just be quiet!" "You can't call me stupid just because I lost my homework! I am not stupid! Never say that again!" "You think that all kids who have punk haircuts are delinquents! You are so wrong! I want you to stop insulting

my friends! I can't stand it anymore!" These are examples of how a young person will stand up for what he thinks is right. Infants and toddlers will also insist on respectful treatment, without words but with complete seriousness of purpose. People seem to be born with an innate expectation of love and respect. Only illness or repeated mistreatment wears down a person's will to fight for what's right.

When we parents are one step ahead of the exhaustion of raising children, it can be a relief to have our children stop us short when we are being harsh or unfair. Ultimately, we want our children to retain their keen sense of justice and to insist on the respect they deserve, even if it's our behavior they challenge. They do well to defend themselves against our tired, irrational, troubled words and actions.

## Listening to Indignation

When a child thinks that he or someone he cares about has been wronged, and he becomes indignant, our best move is to hear him out. What is he saying? Is he right? What can be done about it? When an indignant person meets with good listening and genuine remedies, the incident is soon over and the upset is resolved. An apology, a change of decision, or a promise of a full discussion about the issue are the kinds of remedies we can offer. If you listen and then work with your child to make things right, he'll be satisfied and pleased with himself and with you.

For example, when my two sons would get into their inevitable arguments, I sometimes would listen and become convinced that one son was at fault. I would angrily enter into the fray, blaming one and defending the other. Many times, the son I was defending would turn to me and yell, "Get out of here, Mom! You're blaming him, and you don't know anything about this! You gang up on him and make it worse. This is our fight!" I would stomp away, insulted, of course, and surprised. They would go back to their fight, mad at each other again, but without my upset to deal with. Were they nice to me? No, they were righteous. Did they defend themselves for good reason? Yes, they were fighting for a solution, and my

blame was adding to the problem. Do they yell at me every time I say something in the midst of a fight? No, if I'm sensible and I ask pertinent questions rather than assign blame, they will often use my help. Our children's indignation can keep us from sloppiness in our treatment of them and others. Their finely tuned sense of justice can be a real gift in our lives.

## **Is This Listening Approach Too Permissive?**

If I listen to tantrums and indignation, will my child ever be well behaved again? This is *the* question. It feels like there are too many times when messy upsets arise. If we listen every time, won't life become an uproar? Aren't we reinforcing lack of control? How will we stand this behavior?

Allowing a child's tantrums to run their course, or allowing indignation to be heard, may indeed be hair-raising for a parent the first few times. It can feed our fears of chaos, and it often angers us to see such raw feelings. We take a child's feelings personally, as if our child is giving us a failing grade in parenting. Our interpretations of tantrums and indignation are strong and negative, and we do need a strategy to contend with what goes on inside of us.

Listening Partnerships between parents are an excellent way to progress in the difficult role of listener. In a Listening Partnership, two parents set up a time, away from the children, to focus on the work of parenting. Each one takes a turn to talk about what's going well and what's difficult about parenting. It's time that we can use to address our own feelings about having a frustrated or indignant child. Given the chance to focus on the situations that gnaw at our patience, we can wade into the thick of the action with cooler heads and a more intentional approach.

Many parents who have dared to listen to their children's tantrums and indignation find their children eager to release these tensions. You may be treated to several lively outbursts a day at first, if your child has been on edge. But as his backlog of frustration drains, you'll see a much happier and sturdier child emerge.

He'll certainly run into new situations that frustrate him, because he is an eager learner. But once the backlog is listened through, he won't bristle with tension in every challenging situation. Children love to be in good contact with others. They love to be sure enough of themselves to move without upset from one adventure to another. They have tantrums only when they need to heal from an adventure that overwhelmed their confidence.

One mother I know was lamenting her son's entrance into the terrible twos. He had been feisty and stubborn for a week or two, wanting each detail of life to be just so, with no adult interference. When she moved in close and listened, he had several tantrums over a three or four day period, and then returned to his usual easygoing ways. His personality change had been caused by the need to get a few things off his chest. Relieved, he could re-establish his pleasure in himself and others.

Children don't pick easy times and places to have their tantrums or express their indignation, so don't expect that your good listening will result in a perfectly polite child. While he is young, your child will tantrum when he needs to. The children whose parents have listened to them in this way have not gone into adolescence falling apart with every little frustration. They have taken advantage of this outlet during childhood, and have gathered lots of flexibility and confidence in the process.

Using this approach, you can expect that your child will become increasingly able to meet important challenges. He'll persist in learning even when he has difficulties, and he'll defend his integrity in the face of irrationality. These strengths will stand him in far better stead throughout his life than strict adherence to the rules of etiquette. Relieved of tension, he'll be able to be genuinely pleased with people most of the time. He'll retain real empathy for others because you have treated his feelings with respect, trusting that he would return to thinking as quickly as he could.

## *Our Mission*

Hand in Hand improves the lives of parents and children by nurturing the parent-child connection. To learn more about the *Parenting by Connection* approach and *Listening Tools* for parents and professionals, contact:

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