

Creating Emotional Safety around Tantrums and Crying

By K. T. Korngold, MA

Sometimes children cry. Sometimes children have tantrums. What causes these outbursts, and how can we best support our children during times of stress and upset?

First, it is important to give children positive information about crying—and to let our children know it is okay to cry. We have seen that there are benefits to crying and tantrums. While it is true that a long cry or temper tantrum is not very agreeable to adults, and can be difficult and draining, it seems that after a good cry or a tantrum, children typically become happier, more cooperative, and ready to meet the day. The transformation can be dramatic. The child who was moody or inflexible before the cry or tantrum becomes a delight to be with and seems relaxed and easygoing.

Stay close and pay attention when a child cries. Pat her back or give her arm a gentle stroke. Give a hug if she will let you. Try one or more of the following phrases:

“Crying makes you feel better.”
“It is okay to cry.”
“I am right here.”
“I am here for you.”
“I will stay with you while you cry.”
“I am with you.”

You do not have to give into a child’s demands as a vehicle to stop the tantrum or crying, but you can support children as they express their frustration.

Children need to release tension

and stress, and temper tantrums are a way to help them do this. Be near and attend when a child has a tantrum. Sit right beside him; often your presence will allow the child to let it go. Use the phrases I mentioned. However, there is a lot of energy exploding, so be very careful. Sometimes children appreciate a comforting hug after a tantrum has passed, while other times they may not want to be touched afterward at all. It is important to respect the needs of the child.

For a child who frequently cries or engages in tantrums, there are ways to provide support when he or she is *not* crying or having a tantrum:

1. Give the child plenty of physical closeness: Pat, hold, hug, hum, sing, give a gentle cuddle, and smile.
2. When you are with the child, be fully present and available. Keep outside distractions to a minimum.
3. Pay close attention to the child. Look into his eyes; look at his face; let him know you are there. Take your time; do not rush.
4. Listen respectfully when the child talks. Wait for her to speak, don’t ask too many questions, and stay with her while you are waiting for her to speak. Let the child lead the way. Do not interrupt. Repeat what the child says back to her so she knows you hear her.

Sometimes something specific triggers crying or a tantrum (being tired, hungry, hot, cold, frustrated, or interrupted). Or it can be due to sensory issues, change of directions or plans, or a transition). Sometimes stresses build up over time, and the trigger is just what causes the outburst. Remember, children need to release tension and stress, and a temper tantrum or crying enables them to do that.

Try to let go of your own feelings about a child crying or having a temper tantrum. We don’t need to control children; we need to control our own feelings and our own behavior. Our job is to guide them, to be with them, and to support and enable them to feel safe while they release what they need to release.

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