

## Conflict Resolution with Young Children

In our everyday lives with young children we experience many beautiful and inspiring moments as well as some challenging times. I firmly believe that **how we approach** these challenges **can foster and create an environment of respect and understanding** as opposed to the development of the negative feelings that the word tantrum is commonly associated with. It is my intention to share with you a few ideas into understanding some of the underlying causes for the most common tantrums and how to **aim** to respond in different ways.

It is important for children to **find ways to cope** with difficult or challenging situations, as they need to **encounter resistance** in life and then be able to work through it and move forward. When dealing with young children we must remember that they are **looking to the adult to help them navigate** and make sense of the turmoil and emotions that they are experiencing in that moment: “to be an anchor in the storm”. These times can be seen as opportunities to **role model how we ourselves react to conflict** (or wish we always could) as children feed from the tone we set in resolving these conflicts: our approach to them, our body language, the tone of our voice and the **emotional situation we create**.

As we share this beautiful journey with the children in our lives, we are also with them in this **learning process**, trying to figure out what works for our children and for us. There are times in which we can respond as best as possible to their call for help and others when we will need to explain later how **we could have done things differently**; children can also see that we also make mistakes and learn from them. Not every moment is a teaching moment and sometimes we need to **wait for a calmer moment** to realize how **our reaction directly affects the outcomes**. There is not a magic formula that works every time, but if we start by **recognizing the innate needs of a child** to touch, move and explore and we **treat them the way we would like to be treated** while offering them our **unconditional love and respect**, we can help them **build the skills** needed and lead a more nurturing and peaceful life.

We should strive to **respond in a caring matter** when being around a child who is clearly disoriented by throwing a tantrum and be able to recognize that **sometimes children are exposed to situations they can't handle**. We cannot always provide the best conditions for children to be happy; sometimes there are deadlines to meet or compromises to keep and that is part of life too. We should help children understand that **they can have different feelings like disappointment, frustration or anger but it is different from misbehaving**: “I can see how you're upset and need a moment” but “throwing things is never alright”. “I understand you would like to keep playing in the park” but “it is time to leave now”. Then as you

approach the car offer two choices: “Can you sit and buckle yourself or would you like me to help you? Many “tantrums” can be traced back to the **child’s inability to act in the environment** to grow, to **participate** in activities that are **purposeful and meaningful** to them or a **reaction** to their Sensitive Periods not being understood. These periods are universal and vital to the development of the child.

Here are some of the Sensitive Periods children go through and some examples of how they can **impact** children’s lives and **potentially create conflicts** if they are not taken into consideration by the adult:

**Sensitive Period for Order**-The child is **orienting** himself to his surroundings and we **change or alter things in his environment**. For example re-decorating their room, changing the car seat from one side to the other. As children make sense of the world around them they **need consistency** and benefit from **predictability**. This “order” in their lives helps establish **a frame of reference** and **trust** in the environment: “I know where things are and know what to expect”. This external order helps in developing the **child’s internal order** and self-regulation mechanisms as well.

**\*Transition times** are especially challenging with children who have a very developed sense of order. In our hurried lives **children struggle to find a recognizable pattern** that can offer **some calm** to their daily hectic lives. Children **thrive on routine** and need to know how their day is going to be like. For example, “Today, Grandma is picking you up from school” or “You will be eating your lunch in the car since I am picking you up from school earlier today”.

**Sensitive Period for Language**-During these period children **acquire** the language around them with no effort (vocabulary, syntax, grammar, nuances of the voice). They should be offered the **opportunity to be listened to, to talk and engage in a conversation**. This way, they will be able to gain the skills to communicate more effectively their needs as well as their feelings. If we don’t **recognize and respond to this need to communicate**, children get frustrated from the lack of attention or response to their “reaching out”. Being able to communicate efficiently and to express our feelings **is a skill that needs to be developed to avoid miscommunications**: Talk in a clear manner, express what you need, be a good listener and provide plenty of opportunities to develop language.

**Sensitive Period for Refinement of Movement**- Children are born with an **unstoppable impulse to move** and therefore develop their minds and bodies. This energy **needs to be recognized, guided and understood so the child is offered opportunities to self-construct**. Of course there are times when children need to be “restrained” in a car seat or an airplane and we should be prepared to offer alternatives. For example, playing music or singing with them in the car, bringing a notepad and a

book to an airplane ride. Some situations require us to be very creative and able to improvise activities for them. Children need to move to **develop their muscles and muscle-tone**, so putting your child in a crib, high chair or stroller might be naturally more challenging. The message they receive is “I don’t trust you to be on your own, you’re not capable of controlling your movements”. Children that cannot move and act on their environment may struggle with hand-eye coordination, their hands not responding to what their mind is dictating or their bodies not being able to jump or climb as desired.

**Sensitive Period for Refinement of the Senses-** Children **seek sensorial input by touching, tasting, looking, smelling and hearing every thing that surrounds them.** Many times we **interrupt** or stop actions that we don’t understand that in reality are part of the **child’s needs for exploration.** Concentration should be respected and actions that are not dangerous to the child or others must not be stopped. We cannot “extinguish” behaviors we can only re-direct them; if we say to a child “Don’t touch” we need to offer an alternative: “Please don’t touch that” followed by “let’s find something else you can touch”.

In the Montessori environment we are constantly asked why we do not see many of the tantrums children display at other instances. The key is that the child has the opportunity to be surrounded by materials and activities that will help him to refine the skills he has created the first three years of life and therefore build a competence that will, in return, make him **feel effective, trusted and productive in the world around him.** The environment also responds to the child’s needs for movement, order, independence, repetition and concentration by providing a child-sized environment in which the child’s Sensitive Periods can be met. We should strive to provide a home environment that also responds to these needs; setting different “stations” where the child can help in the kitchen; be safely in the living room, a bedroom and bathroom that allows the child to safely explore and develop independence would be ideal.

Children are also taught by the Exercises of Grace and Courtesy how to be **helpful to others** and take care of their classroom. These activities aid in developing empathy and awareness of **other people’s needs.** The focus is mainly on the effort not the results as children are allowed to learn from their mistakes.

The prepared environment is a place where the child can practice how it feels to be **free to choose** what he needs for his development. **Clear consistent limits** are established and then the children are free to develop their own potentialities. Clear limits help the child **self-regulate** his behavior as opposed to the adult all the time asking for obedience, so what he chooses to do is conducive to **acquiring social skills and building self-esteem.**

He learns to **solve conflicts** because he is respected in his choices and accepts that others have choices as well, and they also need to be taken into consideration. **Showing respect and role-modeling appropriate behavior during temper tantrums is critical.** The adult must acknowledge the emotions that the child cannot understand or control and do their best to keep calm.

When you make decisions or offer two choices that go against what your child wants, you have to kindly but firmly **follow through** and not back down. Some decisions take more time than others and you may need more time to think your answer: “I’ll think about it” closes the argument for the moment and allows the adult to reflect. It is **humanly impossible to always provide the best answer and always be fair to all.** By not giving in to all of the child’s requests we provide a solid background for a **healthy emotional development.** Children that are given too many choices feel they have **control over their parents** and this translates into a feeling of insecurity. When a child sees we won’t change our stand about a certain issue, he understands by unruly behavior he cannot change a decision that has been made by the adult.

Each family has different expectations of how they envision living their life together; what might be normal for one family might be out of bounds for another. Each family must establish a **basic set of rules that are clear and consistent,** but as the child grows and matures there are many transitional stages in which limits have to be re-evaluated and re-established and exceptions can be made. Parents must choose their battles in order not to have a discussion for every detail and **disengage from feeding tantrums in an emotional way.** Children need to perceive the adult knows what is best for them and **will not change his mind,** even if they throw a tantrum.

“It is all right to feel upset just not around me; when you feel calmer you can come right back”. This gives the message I am not going to be close to you when you are screaming; therefore the attention- seeking element is defused. This is how the basis of conflict resolution is established. **If you want someone to hear you, you have to be able to express your feelings and ideas in an appropriate, respectful manner.**

Sometimes emotional outbursts can be accompanied by hitting or by angry words and children should be told immediately (**kindly but firmly**) that hurting themselves or other living beings is unacceptable. Wait for a calmer moment to talk about what happened; brainstorm ideas on how you could have done things differently.

Let your child know how their actions when they become out of control, **affect you and others** around them and be sure they understand that your **love is unconditional.** The child plays an important role in the family and that comes with responsibilities to others and to him. You might disagree or not be happy with a certain

behavior but the love and disposition to understand them is always present, so is the intent to recognize the effort they put in to dealing with tantrums and managing conflicts. All children are different and unique in **the way they respond to every day challenges and decisions** and as parents we need to recognize what we can achieve and offer. **A lot of time, effort, love and understanding are crucial elements to consider when helping children acknowledge, recognize, manage and resolve conflict.**

Kim John Payne begins his book “Simplicity Parenting” by writing: “As parents, we’re the architects of our family’s daily lives. We build a structure for those we love by what we choose to do together, and how we do it. We determine the rhythms of our days: set a pace...we can add a little more space and grace, a little less speed and clutter to our children’s daily lives”. He also writes about how today’s society values speed and trying to offer our children every advantage available to them, but many “tantrums” are the result of the adult not respecting the fact that the child operates at a different speed than adults. Many parents mention being stressed out by their over-scheduled afternoons; let us take a moment when we feel children are trying to communicate something to us about our hurried lives and re-evaluate and re-prioritize our time together.

Children should learn to **appreciate the everyday routine** and be helped to understand the **healthy balance between work, play, rest and some time to do nothing and create your own activities.**

Being attuned to your child’s needs and being able to respond appropriately is a good aim; take good care of yourself so you can be a **good role model**. If you lose your temper and raise your voice, take a deep breath and say: “I am going to try again to tell you what I just said in a different tone of voice”. In the same manner, if your child talks to you in a disrespectful way, ask kindly: “Can you please use a different tone of voice?” After sometime you will see how the environment becomes calmer and your child will **listen better when you convey clearly what you need in a kind but direct manner**. Also **re-direction to a purposeful activity** is very useful as well; this allows the child to **learn from his mistakes** and move forward. Invite the child if he calms down to do something together, **as your time and attention might be all they need.**

As children grow, they develop the ability for **inner dialogue and self-regulation** and therefore can **resolve conflict** more efficiently, but we still need to remember they are acquiring a skill. If we perceive tantrums as a **call from the child for help in orienting himself in a world of adults**, we have taken the first step into shifting a long-time mindset. If we can truly aim to see through the tantrum **what is the child trying to communicate** and we **respond in a caring and respectful**

manner, the child will build upon his sense of security and understand that the **tantrums get the opposite effect they seek**, as what they really are saying is that they want to be close to us. The key element to keep in mind is that young children are **not consciously** seeking to disobey; impulse control and the ability to act upon established limits are not there yet.