

Parenting Pet Peeves – Part 1

Anyone who has cared for a child knows that each child offers their own unique personality and temperament. Caregivers also know that there are things children do that challenge their patience. One of these behaviors includes temper tantrums. Understanding the uniqueness of each child and using some steadfast tips can help reduce the challenges caregivers face with undesirable behavior.

Temper tantrums are defined by a sudden, intense display of uncontrolled anger or frustration. They often include kicking, screaming, falling on the ground, or other forceful body motions like stomping their feet or hitting fists. They are most common in children ages 15 months to 4 years. The embarrassment and frustration a caregiver experiences from these public displays can often lead to poor behavior on the adults' part. The key to thwarting the adult response is to first recognize that "it's not about me!"

First, let's dispel the myth that infants display temper tantrums by crying. The only method for an infant to communicate that they need some form of care is to cry. Comforting a crying infant and meeting their needs in a timely manner develops a sense of security and will reduce crying over time and repeated caregiving.

Toddlers, on the other hand, most certainly have the potential for temper tantrums. In fact, one might argue that some toddlers have mastered this behavior. However, these tantrums are still rooted in the need to communicate. They are just learning how to say basic words "Momma", "Daddy", "Ball", "Puppy" – notice that none of these words are reflective of an emotion. Because toddlers are just learning basic skills of communicating and problem solving, they don't have the ability to express themselves appropriately to what the adult world expects. Most tantrums are likely to happen when toddlers are hungry, tired, frustrated, or overexcited. As parents recognize these "triggers" they can adjust their responses to make them appropriate to the toddlers need.

As children approach their preschool years, the number of temper tantrums drop off. At this age, their coping skills and communications skills have developed in such a way that they can express their emotions, wants, and needs in more skillful ways. That's not to say that they don't still relapse into a tantrum on occasion, but the frequency should be less as they get older.

How can a caregiver cope with the temper tantrums of children? First, stay calm. Modeling the desired behavior – low voice volume, passive face, and regulated

breathing – helps the child see what you expect. Spanking and screaming will only escalate the situation and prove to prolong this behavior past the preschool years.

Parents need to hit their personal “pause” button. This means they should take a breath and pause at least 10 seconds before they act. Follow that pause by trying one of four actions: 1) seek a way to distract the child from their trigger, 2) remove the child from the environment, 3) hold the child to give them a greater sense of security, or 4) ignore the behavior if the situation allows.

Don't try to talk to the child while they are still upset. After everyone is calmed, then talk to them calmly. Use the experience as a chance to teach the child acceptable ways to manage their anger or frustration. Explain that they need to ask for help when they get frustrated or teach them self-calming strategies.

Teach children the words to use to express feelings, then direct them to “use their words” to express themselves. Teach children how to hit their own “pause” button and give them time to take a breath and relax themselves.

I use a non-verbal cue with my children. I taught them to take their right index finger and gently push it into the palm of their other hand and breathe out while they do so. They may need to do this more than once to start feeling the calming effect. It's great non-verbal cue to use in public because it requires no words and therefore, no raised voices.

Finally, to help curb the frequency and need a child feels to display their emotions in the form of a temper tantrum, nurture your child. Nurture goes beyond a smile or hug. Nurture means to care for and encourage the growth or development of your child(ren). Tantrums can scare children because they don't understand the reason why they lost control. They need to be encouraged to develop better ways to behave and express themselves. They need to feel unconditional love.

Additional actions parents can take for preventing tantrums include:

- ✓ Set realistic limits and routines that are appropriate to your child's age. Be especially attentive to and consistent with mealtimes and bed times.
- ✓ Offer choices to children that are age-appropriate and acceptable for the family's lifestyle. Don't ask the child if they *want* to take a nap unless "no" is an acceptable answer. Instead, offer a nap right after lunch or perhaps after a brief and quiet post-lunch activity like listening to music or reading a book.
- ✓ Pick your battles and avoid fighting over petty things.

- ✓ Give the child a few minutes warning before ending an activity or changing from one activity to another.
- ✓ Help your child find a balance between challenging activities and ones that are too difficult for them.

Children have a wide variety of temperaments and personalities. Working with them while they learn to express their feelings is important to the parent-child relationship and builds trust.

For more information about child development and parenting, contact me at the Geary County Extension office at 785-238-4161. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!