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## Tantrum Tamer: New Ways Parents Can Stop Bad Behavior



By SHIRLEY S. WANG

Forget everything you may have read about coping with children's temper tantrums. Time-outs, sticker charts, television denial—for many, none of these measures will actually result in long-term behavior change, according to researchers at two academic institutions.



Whether a child has violent temper tantrums or is extremely clingy, their behaviors can be curbed, according to child psychologists at Yale University and King's College London. Shirley Wang has details on Lunch Break.



Instead, a set of techniques known as "parent management training" is proving so helpful to families struggling with a child's unmanageable behavior that clinicians in the U.S. and the U.K. are starting to adopt them.

Aimed at teaching parents to encourage sustained behavior change, it was developed in part at parenting research clinics at Yale University and King's College London.

Even violent tantrums, or clinging to the point of riding on a parent's leg, can be curbed, researchers say.

These behaviors appear to be partly influenced by genetic factors, studies show, but parents can also inadvertently encourage them—for example, by paying attention only when the child screams or cries, but not when the child is playing quietly.

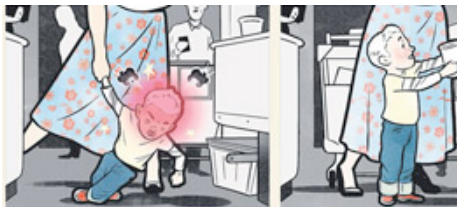
Simply rewarding good behavior isn't particularly effective, says Alan Kazdin, a Yale psychology professor and head of the Yale Parenting Center. "Every parent on the planet has tried charts and point programs," he says. Explaining to a child why you want them to do something, or punishing them with long time-outs, isn't effective either, he says.

Instead, the training focuses on three components known as the ABCs: the Antecedent, or the environment and events that set the stage for a tantrum or other undesirable action.



Getty Images

A set of techniques known as 'parent management training' is proving helpful to families struggling with temper tantrums in children.



**Let's Pretend to Have a 'Good' Tantrum**  
 This technique takes time and patience, but researchers say it can be successful in helping children move past tantrums. **Problem:** A child throws terrible tantrums in the grocery store, hitting, kicking, crying and screaming on the ground. **you to pretend to have a tantrum where you can kick and scream on the ground, but don't hit mommy or throw things. If you can't have a "tantrum" without** **you don't hit anyone!** **Reward her saying, "I do** **Now I but you can't do two in a row! Cycle repeats.** **Essential**

Jason Schneider

Then there is the Behavior itself, and how parents can help a child learn new behaviors, in some cases using pretend scenarios.

The Consequences component involves reinforcing a positive behavior or discouraging a negative one.

Although these principles are quite basic, they are challenging, psychologists say. They require both patience and emotional restraint from parents, who also must invest time and energy into changing their parenting practices. "The devil is in the doing of it," says Stephen Scott, director of the National Academy for Parenting Research at King's College London.

The effects can be beneficial for both child and parent. A nine-year study at the Oregon Social Learning Center, a nonprofit research center, looked at single mothers and children with antisocial tendencies—arguing, hitting, tantrums, extreme unwillingness to cooperate.

After the mothers went through a version of the ABCs training, not only did the children's behaviors improve over the long term, but the mothers also exhibited gains in income, occupation and education, according to the study, published last year in the journal *Developmental Psychopathology*.

One major tenet is to reinforce desired behavior with praise and to ignore negative behavior. Using an enthusiastic tone of voice, parents should be specific about which behavior they are praising. Say, "I asked you to pick up that toy and you did it," rather than, "You're a good girl," or "You make mommy happy." Parents should also offer a touch, Dr. Kazdin says.

It is useful to point out the desired behavior in other children—"See how nicely that boy is playing with others"—but parents should refrain from adding what he calls the "caboose"—a phrase like "Why can't you do that?"

Parents are the focus of the ABC techniques, but that doesn't mean they are the cause of tantrums, Dr. Scott says. Parents, though, should model the behavior they want in their child, such as talking respectfully to each other if they want their child to talk nicely to friends.

Recently, a mother and her 5-year-old daughter came to Dr. Scott's London clinic for their third visit to help the girl with severe separation anxiety and temper tantrums. The immediate goal was to get the daughter to cling less to mom and play more independently.

The mother and daughter played together on the floor with toys, while a therapist behind a mirror coached the mother via a wireless earpiece.

At first, the daughter sat on her mother's lap and didn't want to play. "I want you to put some distance between you, Mom," the therapist said. The mother moved her daughter to the floor and shifted a few inches away. "Touch her, Mom," the therapist said. "You want to keep the distance between you but show that you're still there for her."

When the daughter gave her mother a toy instead of playing with it herself, the therapist told the mother to say, "You try it." When the daughter did it, the mother said enthusiastically, "You're playing with the doll!"

When the girl sat glumly, the mother was instructed not to coax her into playing, but simply describe what she was doing. "You're sitting there thinking what do to next," she said. "You're still thinking about what to play with next."

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### Before, During and After the Storm

Here are some tips that can help create lasting changes in a child's behavior:

Point out other children exhibiting a desired behavior. 'See how nicely that boy is sharing.' Don't add, 'Why can't you?'

Firmly phrase instructions in terms of what to do, instead of what not to do.

In case of a temper tantrum, remain calm. Describe the behavior. 'You are pretending you don't hear me when I say it's time to go.'

Praise reasonable reactions, muted tantrums or any efforts at self-control.

State which behavior is being praised. 'I asked you to pick up the toys, and you did.'

As much as possible, ignore negative behaviors. Don't communicate desperation or beg.

Model the behavior you want your child to exhibit.

Don't give up. Some behaviors can take months for a child to master.

The therapists commended the mother for not jumping in to play every time her daughter wanted her to. It was an encouraging session, but there was more work to do, the therapists said. The daughter stayed off her mother's lap for most of the 15 minutes.

In some cases, the techniques can seem counterintuitive. A child who screams and breaks household objects when angry may have to be praised first for screaming but not throwing things.

Parents would teach this by playing a game of let's-pretend-you-have-a-tantrum-but-you-don't-throw-things. Eventually, with practice, the child will learn to express frustration at a normal volume.

Often, events leading up to a tantrum are critical to whether the tantrum actually takes place, research shows. Parents can set up good behavior by being firm, but also offering a choice. Say, "It's time to put on your jacket now. Please choose your red one or green one."

Sometimes, a small change in tone is enough. A family recently showed up at the Yale clinic, desperate for their son to be potty trained. The parents had showed him how to do it, and they had talked about why he should do it. They set up a chart to reward him with points or ice cream. The boy had used the toilet twice in six months but otherwise refused.

The parents needed to get rid of their tone of desperation, Dr. Kazdin says. Instead of begging, they were instructed to say, "You don't have to go to the toilet. When you're bigger, you'll get it."

The next day, the child began to use the toilet regularly, Dr. Kazdin recalls, and the parents were stunned. "There's no magic there," he says. In this case, the child already knew how to use the toilet. There was just something in the way the parents were setting up the situation that led him to refuse. The child was rebelling.

It's unclear, Dr. Kazdin says, why certain children and not others respond to parental eagerness and pressure in this way. But the pattern is fairly common at the clinic, he says.

In clinics for children whose behavioral problems are severe—which often means they are having trouble in school or carrying out other regular activities—parents are coached extensively. Clinicians find that even subtle differences in the parents' behaviors can lead to remarkable changes in the child's, Dr. Kazdin says.

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