

Temper tantrums and toddlers:

“Your child is not looking for attention, she is looking for control. What she needs to know, above all things”, I emphasised to the couple I was working with, “is that you as parents are stronger than she is. In other words, when she is having a tantrum it is essential that you show that you are strong enough to hold her.”

Anne and Nick were a couple in their thirties struggling with their five year old daughter, Siobhan, who was beginning to ‘run-the-show’ at home with outrageous temper tantrums which including screaming, kicking, falling on the ground, breaking things etc. To know the seriousness of such behaviour you need to evaluate the effects on the parents. Anne admitted that she was now afraid of Siobhan’s behaviour, not only at home, but particularly when in public or with company. She found herself willing to do anything to pacify Siobhan in order to prevent one of these episodes. At home Anne was so fed up with Siobhan’s behaviour that she found herself giving-in to her all the time.

Anne’s growing fear of Siobhan’s behaviour was the critical sign that things needed to be taken in hand. As soon as any child evokes fear in a parent a line has been crossed that needs to be recovered because, most often, such uncontrolled and actually naïve intimidation is not good at all for the child’s development, not to mind the parent’s confidence. Therefore I continued with my encouragement. I asked both of them their age which came to a combined total of 72 years and went on. “So you have 72 years of life experience versus Siobhan’s 5 years. There should be no-contest really! What you must acknowledge to yourselves is that if you decide to bring these 72 years of lived experience to bear on this situation then you will have absolutely no problem in handling Anne assertively through this very difficult stage. Would you agree?” They smiled and nodded in agreement.

I emphasise this to remind them that, despite the fact that Siobhan seems to be controlling the house, she could not have any clue, really, about what is going on or what is at stake and that they must be fearless in parenting her. However, this had to start from a point of self-confidence and self-belief. “I have little doubt that you as a couple can handle this situation when you take hold of your confidence and responsibility.”

“As I was saying earlier, it is absolutely vital that Siobhan begins to bump up against your unmovable strength, a strength that is not fuelled by anger or fatigue but by an assertive conviction and integrity that communicates to her that you are stronger than she is and can hold and manage her.”

I have found with parents that parenting techniques and strategies wear thin very quickly if the parent does not have a conviction and self-belief about their role, competence, and capability.

In dealing with temper tantrums most parents reach the point where their ‘little devil’ just escalates their outrageousness to a point where the parent backs off *because the parent does not want to use strength or force* to manage the situation. So they let the child escalate things further until they as parents end up trying to reason with the child that is completely unreasonable. Things get pathetic when this happens because the

parent resorts to all sorts of desperate bribery that results in the child really calling the shots.

What the parents have to do is to create a consequence that involves a show of non-aggressive and non-abusive strength but usually has to involve physical intervention. Such intervention often has to involve a physical holding, restraining, lifting, and removing of the kicking and screaming child to a safe room, where they cannot hurt themselves, but from which they will not be allowed to exit until they calm down.

This is very difficult for some parents to do but, in my view, is often an essential means of managing and emotionally holding the out-of-control child. The goal of this kind of parenting is to help the child learn how to regulate and control their own emotions by facing non-abusive but nonetheless immediate and uncompromising consequences.

I worked with one family where the parents had to set up a special room into which the child was put. This room had a bed and soft furnishings but nothing that the child could use to damage themselves or property. With tears in her eyes the mother had to lift her screaming and wriggling toddler into the room and lock it until he calmed down and sought entry with a simple "Sorry Mom, for screaming and shouting". For the child to get himself from a point of screaming to a point of apology required that he regulated his emotions and soothed himself. This was an essential learning in his own development - that he did not have to vent his frustration in violent tantrums.

This cannot be taught verbally by a parent, the children have to do it for themselves. It is in fact a skill used by a three-month old baby. Children have to learn to soothe themselves. It is essential. . In this latter case, within a couple of days the child's tantrums had been eliminated and the mother began to reinforce and compliment more constructive responses.

This kind of intervention is awfully difficult for gentle parents because it goes against the grain of what loving parenting should be. But children who are losing control of themselves need to feel they are held by a strength they can lean into. With shows of real character strength by the parents the child learns to relax and control their anger in ways that are *good for them*.

**