



Temper-tantrums

This may be one of the parent's worst nightmare. Specially when they happen in public places, family events or just when you're about to leave for a scheduled meeting. Many times this makes everyone be late to everything, right? But there's something deeper happening behind these behaviors that we want to help you understand.

"Mary asked her mother: "may I have some cookies?", her mom was busy in that moment finishing lunch and answered: "no, in 10 minutes food will be ready". As she heard this Mary broke into tears and yelled: "I hate you! you're so mean!", she threw herself on the floor and started to spit and kick the wall. Her mom was bewildered, she had no idea why Mary reacted that way so she got angry and with a loud voice told Mary she was disobedient for not following instructions.

It's very common that parents of children from hard places mistake this kind of explosions with intentional disobedience but they are not the same. These disturbing behaviors like temper tantrums, hiding, hitting or yelling in these children may be the consequence of a deep and primary fear. That is way many of the strategies used to correct them are not enough. Why? because they are based on a false premise; that the child or teenager has control over his/her thoughts, emotions and behaviors. We assume incorrectly that by their age they should have the ability to plan, analyze and control their overwhelming feelings that cause the temper-tantrums.

In reality, many children and even teenagers from a hard background have not developed what is known as "executive functions" in the brain. That's why no half an hour lecture, nor reasoning, nor "think before you act", or appealing to their logic can convince them to behave in those moments of distress.

Remember that children and teenagers may be a certain age chronologically but emotionally they may be half their age.

Most of the children that show constant tantrums don't "misbehave" intentionally. They are experiencing primitive responses of stress because they're only functioning with the lower part of their brain. To understand the brain of a child we can picture a house. The lower part of the house or the lower brain is a more primitive structure because its job has to do with innate reactions such as fight or flight, and strong emotions like anger or fear. The upper part of the house or upper brain is a more complex structure in charge of more elaborate mental processes like thinking, reasoning and planning. The upper brain is in charge of decision-making, controlling emotions, self-monitoring, etc.

When the upper brain is functioning well, the child can regulate his emotions, think of consequences, think before acting and have other's feelings in mind. But the reality is that most of the children from hard places function almost exclusively with their lower brain because they haven't had an optimum development. Their brain is not fully integrated.

How then, can we address this better? We must be parents and caretakers that have their brain in mind. Our task is to help them build the stairs from the lower part to the upper part of the house, so they can connect the lower brain with the upper. You can only accomplish this in this direction. We do this by finding ways in which the child feels safe through loving responses that provide felt safety and respecting their individuality. We must prioritize to calm the lower brain reactivity over anything else, like you would do with a baby that just arrived home.

When we use strategies addressing the upper brain first, using lectures or trying to reason, we send the false message that if they try hard enough they can improve. Hearing this time and time again starts to damage their self-image, confidence and the relationship between parent and child because what they think is that no matter how hard they try, they can never measure up to what is expected of them.

We need to understand that in order for a child to control his emotions and behaviors, they require to have certain foundations in place first. For a child to learn to calm his body and mind. He/She needs for the caregiver to be able to calm him/her in a loving way. Emotional regulation develops from co-regulation with loving adults. It is not developed by itself, you have to do it with them just like you would with a baby.

The pathways in the brain of a child with a wounded past are deep and, in order to build new ones is going to take effort, patience and calmness. With time, this skills will become the foundation of the emotional house of the child. You will be able to see that even a child like Mary can learn to face frustrations in a more balanced way.

In practical terms, how can we help them build these skills?

- Focus on your child's feelings before addressing behaviors or jumping to solutions. Find ways to communicate, with or without words, "I see how hard this is, I'm with you, you're not alone". We're used to talking first when our first step is to simply join our child emotionally, sending the message that they're safe with us.
- After validating their feelings, help them calm in body, mind and spirit. Every child has his own preferences in how they like to be calmed. Some like a tender voice, some a gentle touch or swinging in arms and others just prefer you to stay near them without doing anything.

- Once the child can calm down with the help of his/her parent or caregiver, we can start using the upper level part of the brain to help the child understand how he's feeling and learn new ways of dealing with his emotions. This only happens when the foundation of emotional regulation is steady.
- Helping children starts when we work on our own emotional, mental and spiritual stability and regulation. Tantrums can be a test to our patience and ability to stay calm. Our compassionate presence, having in mind their needs is the best way to calm their agitated state of mind.

Our prayer for your family this week,

is that our Good God gives you the wisdom, perseverance and faith you need to continue the race He's traced for you. May you continue to experience His love and strength as you face each day and may you continue to seek His face to shine His light, truth and love to your family and those around you.

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