

# A LINE ON LIFE

7/29/91

## Teaching Tantrums

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Most of you have observed a child throwing a tantrum in a public place. Usually this is very embarrassing to the parent who is with the child. Why do these children throw tantrums?

As you may have guessed from the title, *parents typically teach their children to throw tantrums*. Most parents don't want their children to throw tantrums, but they teach their children this basic tactic anyway. How do they teach it?

As an example, suppose a mother is baking cookies in the late afternoon. As the cookies come out of the oven, their delicious smell spreads all over the house. Of course, this odor will attract her preschool child. He\* will probably ask, "*Mummie, kin I have a cookie?*" Since it is only a short time until supper, the mother might reply in the following way — "*No, it's too close to supper time. If you have a cookie now, you won't want to eat all of your supper. You can have a cookie after you eat your supper.*"

To this, he may start to whimper and plead, "*Please, mummie, please? They smell soooo good. Kin I have a cookie? Please? Pretty please?*" The mother may stand firm to this second attempt, repeating her previous statement. "*No, you can't have one now; but you can have cookies after you eat your supper.*"

Since the whimpering and pleading did not work, he might get angry and try another method. Now the child jumps up and down pounding on the table. While doing this, he screams, "*I WANNA COOKIE! GIMME COOKIE! GIMME, GIMME, GIMME!*"



With her patience tried to the breaking point, the annoyed mother might respond by yelling back, "*OKAY, HERE'S YOUR COOKIE! NOW GET OUT OF HERE AND LEAVE ME ALONE!*" The child gets the cookie and leaves. Things are peaceful again.

What has really happened? The mother may think that she has successfully dealt with the tantrum, because it is over. She may see both parties as getting what they want. Her son got the cookie he wanted, and she is now getting the peace she wants.

But what is the child thinking? The child views the situation very differently. He has discovered another method of getting his desires met. He now probably thinks that the louder he yells, the more likely he is to get what he wants. If he wants something in the future, he is more likely to throw a tantrum, because this tantrum succeeded.

How can tantrums be stopped? First, if you want to stop tantrums, it helps if you realize that they are easiest to stop the first time they occur. After children become used to getting what they want by throwing tantrums, it is very difficult to stop them.

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**Giving in to tantrums  
is the surest way to guarantee  
that they will continue.**

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Some parents may reply, "*I only give in to the tantrums every once in a while.*" If parents only let their children get away with tantrums "*every once in a while,*" they are the most difficult to stop. Most of the time, the child does not get rewarded. However, the child never can predict when he will be successful. Therefore, even though many tantrums have failed, he still keeps trying. Like the compulsive gambler, he thinks that there will be a sure payoff — if he keeps on trying.

Although there are different ways to deal with a tantrum, one of the best is to ignore the tantrum. Children start to throw tantrums, because they cannot get what they want. If they get what they want by throwing a tantrum, they are more likely to use tantrums in the future. (Why not? They work.) In fact, if tantrums are well rewarded, children may skip the pleading and go directly to the tantrum.

In contrast, if the tantrums are not rewarded, they are less likely to be repeated. If the first few tantrums are not rewarded, children are almost sure to drop this method. (Would you continue to use a method that did not help you reach your goals?)

One fear of many parents is what to do if the *child holds his breath* when he throws a tantrum. Some children do hold their breath when they have a tantrum, even to the point where they faint. To the unknowing mother, this can be a terrifying event. She may think, "*My baby is dying!*" Essentially all of these children will resume breathing in about 30 seconds. But to a terrified mother, these seconds seem like hours. If she can't wait for the 30 seconds, she can bring him around immediately by splashing some cold water in his face. (Depending on the amount of hostility she feels, the amount of water can vary from a few drops to a bucket-full.)

Once the child starts breathing, the mother should again ignore him. The mother may feel that she wants to hug the child in relief that he is not dying, but this can also reward a tantrum. She can give him hugs later, when he is doing approved behavior.

If the child was throwing a tantrum for a cookie, how will a hug reward the tantrum? Even though children apparently throw tantrums for desired objects and privileges, what many of them really want is their parent's attention. A hug is a form of attention. In addition, this is why spanking is not as effective as ignoring the tantrum. Painful attention is still attention. Painful or not, some attention is more rewarding than no attention at all.

Give your children lots of hugs and attention. However, give the attention and hugs when they do approved behavior, not when they throw tantrums. In this way, you will not be teaching tantrums.

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\* Although the pronoun "*he*" is used for clarity in this article, the child could just as easily be a girl. Likewise, the parent involved could just as easily be the father.