

Why We Should NOT Ignore a Tantrum — or — Where NPR's Health Blog Missed the Boat

Posted on [January 2, 2012](#)

Several people have asked me recently about [Shankar Vendantam's post](#) on NPR's Health Blog, where he writes about a subject I've discussed a good bit: [tantrums](#). In Vendantam's article, he discusses a recent study that appeared in the journal *Emotion*, where scientists examined different toddler sounds that typify a tantrum.

I find [the whole study](#) – which analyzes the patterns of sound and action that usually accompany a tantrum – absolutely fascinating. And I'm grateful to any scientists (in this case Michael Potegal and James A. Green) who offer us new information that can help us better understand our children so we can be more loving and nurturing as we interact with them. I also want to mention Vendantam's book *The Hidden Brain*. I haven't read it yet, but it's on my "get to" list, since I understand that it raises some really interesting questions regarding how much our brain drives who we are, even without our awareness.

Having said all that, a couple of objections kept nagging at me when I read Vendantam's blog post about Green and Potegal's science explaining "what's behind a temper tantrum." Specifically, I kept wanting to hear less about how parents can "get a tantrum to end as soon as possible" (though I totally understand this desire and have felt this way during many of my own children's tantrums), and more about how parents can be emotionally responsive and present when their kids are upset.

In other words, I wanted a tantrum to be presented not only as an unpleasant experience that parents can learn to manage for their own benefit, but instead as another opportunity to make a child feel safe and loved, which would offer the added benefit that she'll learn to better express her feelings, and reign those emotions in more quickly and appropriately in the future. So much of the way I look at tantrums begins with parental empathy. For example, it's really important to understand WHY children have tantrums: Their young, undeveloped brains are subject to becoming disintegrated as their big emotions take over. As Dan Siegel and I explain in our book *The Whole-Brain Child*, when the different parts of a child's brain work together in a coordinated way, it creates a state of integration and the child is able to deal with things not going his way. But when the more primitive parts of his brain (what we call the "downstairs brain") take over, and the more flexible, thoughtful parts of his brain (the "upstairs brain") stop working well, the child dis-integrates, and that's when we see the screaming, yelling, kicking, etc. It really helps to understand that during this "[downstairs tantrum](#)," the reactive part of a child's brain is in charge.

For this reason, I don't like the strategy that Vendantam advocates, to do nothing. Green and Potegal are right that asking questions can further upset a child; parents tend to over-talk in general when their kids are upset. But that fact doesn't at all logically lead to the conclusion that we should ignore our children when they're distraught.

In fact, here are two main reasons NOT to ignore a child in the midst of a tantrum:

Reason #1: A child in a tantrum-state is suffering.

Just like our kids need us to be with them and provide reassurance and comfort when they're physically hurting, they need the same thing when they're suffering emotionally. Of course, this is not to say that we should allow a child to harm himself, put others at risk, or destroy things. We may have to help him control his body during a downstairs tantrum, and we can lovingly set

boundaries with lots of comfort and empathy. That's what a child needs when he's upset. If we view tantrums as our child being difficult or manipulative or naughty, it's not too easy to respond with calm empathy. However, we can more easily rise to this challenge when we see that our child needs us to be calm and loving because he is suffering.

Reason #2: A quick end to the tantrum isn't the goal.

I'm actually skeptical about the researchers' claim that doing nothing is the fastest ways to address a child's anger and put an end to a tantrum. But even if Green and Potegal are right on this point, is that really the ultimate goal? I know how unpleasant a tantrum can be – believe me, I know. But ask yourself a question. Out of two possible messages, which would you prefer to send to your child?

Message 1: *You're on your own if you get angry and upset. I love you, and I'll be here for you once you're done throwing your fit; but as long as you keep acting this way, I'm going to ignore you. So hurry up and finish being upset.*

Message 2: *I'm here for you even when you're falling apart and at your absolute worst. I can take it. I've got your back.*

When you send this second message, you're not giving in. You're not being permissive. Again, you can (and should) still set boundaries. But you do so while communicating your love and walking through the difficult moment with your child.

Plus, a huge benefit is that you're actually making things easier for both your child and yourself in the future. By providing your empathy and calm presence during a tantrum, you're actually building your child's capacity to behave better in the future, because emotional responsiveness strengthens the integrative connections in her brain that allow her to make better choices, control her body and emotions, and think about others.

So the next time your little one throws herself on the floor and completely falls apart, don't walk away. Send her the message that you're there with her in her suffering, even if it takes a minute longer for calm to return. And like I said, I think this approach might actually help you both get through the whole ordeal much more quickly, and ultimately let her know you are there for her even when she is at her worst and the world is completely chaotic.

I Like to Move It Move It! (revised)

Posted on [June 22, 2011](#)

We tend to think that our emotions reside in our brain. And they do, but they also can begin with our bodies. In fact, by the time you realize that you're anxious, your body has already known for a while—your shoulders are tight, your jaw is clenched, your stomach might be churning. By the same token, you can make yourself feel more calm and peaceful, just by focusing on your body.

Try it right now. Wherever you are, pay attention to your body for the next few seconds. Take a deep breath, then slowly let it out. As you do, relax your shoulders. Do you feel that? Do you feel some of the tension in your body begin to dissipate? Do it one more time. Deep breath, relaxed shoulders. Do you see how you can feel more calm and serene just by adjusting what your body's doing?

The reason is that our emotions are intensely connected to the sensations of the body. Because the nervous system runs throughout the body and is part of the brain, what our body does significantly impacts our brain, including the way we experience our emotions.

This is great news, because it's just one more example of how we can intentionally influence, to a fairly significant extent, how we experience the world. We can't always choose how we

feel, but in important ways, we really can influence our own emotions. You might have heard about experiments where smiling for a bit actually made people feel happier, and frowning made people feel down.

One simple way to shift our emotional states, especially when we're feeling upset, is by moving our bodies. Because physical movement can alter the chemistry in the brain, it can change the way we feel.

This can be a powerful tool for parents to have at their disposal. For example, if you have a young child who's having a hard time handling her behavior or emotions, have her move her body. Grab a big ball and begin a game of catch. Or turn on music and dance together, quickly shifting things for both of you when frustrations are running high. You can also have her do a few yoga-type stretches. Or play animal charades: ask her to show you how an alligator snaps its jaws, or how a bear would climb a tree. This can be a surprisingly quick (and fun) way to move moods in better directions.

It works for older kids, too. I told my nine-year-old's Little League coach about this principle, and he ended up having the boys jump up and down in the dugout when they got discouraged after giving up a few runs during the championship. Their shoulders were slumped and they had given up, but energetic movement brought a shift of excitement and new energy into their bodies and brains, and they eventually came back and won the game. (Chalk up another victory for neuroscience!)