

Subj: **Tantrums**
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Sesame Family Newsletter

June 12, 2009

Tantrums

by Elana A. Halberstadt

Accepting and taming tantrums.

Featuring:

Big Feelings Beyond Words
Tantrum Triage
Calm in the Storm
This Too Shall Pass
This Week on the Street...



This Week on the Street...

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BIG FEELINGS BEYOND WORDS



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I love my 2-and-a-half-year old son Max beyond words. When Max has a tantrum, though, it feels beyond words, exasperating and endless -- for both of us. What in the world is going on? Minutes pass like hours! From the inside out, tantrums feel, sound, and look chaotic. One moment Max is playing happily with trains, and the next he lets out ear-piercing screams accompanied by puddles of tears, as well as kicking and thrashing. Uh oh! The trains are off the track! Restoring calm is key, but wow, that is very hard to do when I can barely think straight! When I am alone with Max during a tantrum, while difficult and loud, at least no one is watching or judging my tantrum-wrangling skills.

Public tantrums are harder than the private ones. But anyone who looks on with disapproving stares has either never had kids or has forgotten what its like to have young kids.

Tantrums come in varying degrees of length and intensity, but they are *all* full of feelings and require my *full* attention. Yes, there are triggers and warning signs before a full-blown meltdown. But, sometimes no matter what I do, tantrums creep up and take me by surprise. I can prevent some, tame some, and others I need to let run their course.

TANTRUM TRIAGE



Great Ways To Build Vocabulary

Help your child learn more words.

No matter whether a tantrum is big or little, how I react is generally the same. The first thing I do is listen -- I try to get into Max's moment, whatever the immediate situation is. I try to understand what he might be feeling and why. I show him that I am here, that I love him, and I stay close. I comfort and ask, "What's wrong, Max?" I try to figure out the cause. Is it a physical need? Is he hurt, hungry or thirsty? Then a kiss on the boo-boo, or snack and juice will sometimes help Max calm down.

Is Max tired? Sometimes he needs a nap or to go to bed ASAP. The tired meltdowns are usually characterized by a frenzy and flood of tears. Whatever I try to do is usually met with, "Waaahhhhhh...Mommyyyyyyy!" And nothing I do is right. He's too exhausted to process anything and has no words. I switch to a soothing voice or sing a song. I reassure him. "It's OK, Max, whatever you're feeling, it's OK. We'll get through this together." And the less I say the better. I listen and I hold him until he calms down (or falls asleep).

If Max is reacting to a limit I've set, or something I told him that he can't have or do, I nip it in the bud. I say, "I hear you're angry because I won't let you: cross the street without holding hands /

ride in the car without buckling the seat belt / eat pigeon poop. It's not safe and I don't want you to get hurt." I will repeat this a few times. To get him safely across the street, I will carry him kicking and screaming if I have to. The car doesn't move until he's belted in. I offer another snack option. He cries. "It's fine if you're angry and cry. You can also use your words...I'm angry!" Sometimes Max still needs to vent. Once he is safe and I back off, the tantrum usually ends.

Then there are times Max is upset, but doesn't want to be touched. I stay close and don't touch him. "I hear and see you." He needs to wail about whatever perceived injustice his brain can't handle, like when I give him the wrong color juice cup (even if he's just chosen it).

"Use your words, Max," I encourage.

"Waahhh---I want the blue cup! No, the green one! Greeeeeeeeen cup!"

"OK. You want the green cup. Good job using your words!"

There is always a reason for Max's tantrums, even if at the time they seem completely unreasonable. Tantrums are an inevitable part of growing up and they are here to stay for a while. I really try to use them as opportunities to teach Max how to cope with, tolerate, understand, and express his feelings, frustrations, wants, and needs. Sometimes I can prevent or quickly stop a tantrum, other times, not so much.

CALM IN THE STORM



Creating Music and Art

Playful and fun activities to do with your child.

It's not always easy to stay calm and feel in control in the midst of a supermarket aisle meltdown. This is especially true when Max's volume threatens to shatter glass -- never mind my hearing. Max gets so worked up and angry. He can't always express in words what he feels, wants or doesn't want. In these moments, what Max needs most are my love, patience and understanding. He also needs me to stay calm and take charge.

I wish I could wave a wand to make tantrums magically disappear. I think most parents would agree that tantrums are no fun. But doing something fun or finding the humor in the situation helps us laugh, and often stops the downward spiral. Tickles, cuddles, or any simple show of affection can help stop a tantrum before it gets too big. Distraction helps, too. "Oh, look Max, a helicopter!" Putting on music or even scrolling through alarm sounds and ring tones on my cell phone can do the trick. Changing activities (from playing trains to reading) or the environment (go to the playground if Max is bored and needs buddies, or home if he's over stimulated and cranky) also help. We look out the window and play our game "What do you see, Max?" We count clouds or his toes. Any tangible objects Max can see clearly or touch and hold (soft toys or our cat) have the power to bring him out of the frenzy and restore peace.

One favorite book we've been reading with Max since he was a baby is *My Many Colored Days* by Dr. Seuss. Using colors to label and describe emotions, it's fantastic for all ages and a great jumping off place for chats about feelings. I read it as much for me, as for Max.

THIS TOO SHALL PASS

We were on our way home (for lunch and a nap) after a long hot morning at the park. There we were in the enclosed space of an elevator with Max in a full-scale meltdown. A woman in the elevator asked me Max's age. I answered as Max screamed, wiggled, and did his limp noodle slither to the floor. She was sympathetic and said, "Oh, the twos, that's rough." I wanted to tell her that this is a good day. Max was very clear about his feelings leaving the playground. "Max wants to play at park more! Go back! Park! Plaaaaaayyyy!" As far as I was concerned, everything was fine, even with

the high-pitched screaming and the eye-rolling neighbors. And we still had 21 floors to go! I picked Max up and he wrapped his arms around my neck. He was hot and tired. The woman departed on her floor with, "Good luck. It gets better." Max started calming down. We can always use more luck, but it was clear a nap would do.

Yours in Tantrumville,

Elana A. Halberstadt
Sesame Workshop

ABOUT THE WORKSHOP



Sesame Workshop is a nonprofit educational organization making a meaningful difference in children's lives around the world. Founded in 1968, the Workshop changed television forever with the legendary *Sesame Street*. Today, the Workshop continues to innovate on behalf of children in 120 countries, using its proprietary research methodology to ensure its programs and products are engaging and enriching. Sesame Workshop is behind award-winning programs like *Dragon Tales* and *Sagwa, The Chinese Siamese Cat*, *Pinky Dinky Doo* and ground breaking multimedia productions in South Africa, Egypt and Russia. As a nonprofit, Sesame Workshop puts the proceeds it receives from sales of *Sesame Street*, *Dragon Tales* and *Sagwa* products right back into its educational projects for children around the world. Find the Workshop online at <http://www.sesameworkshop.org>.

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