



# Surviving tantrums

Have you ever stopped to think about the reason behind your child's meltdowns? Psychologist and behaviour analyst **Gillian Martin** tells us why positive behaviour support could be the key to reducing and understanding tantrums

**B**ehavioural meltdowns – we've all been there: the hissy-fit in the supermarket for a packet of crisps; the deep sigh (followed by the stomping off and the dramatic slam of the door) or dealing with the sit-in protest in the playground.

When it comes to kids acting out, there are many people giving us the 'right answers' and it can get very confusing. Should we hold our ground resolutely no matter what? Should we respond with a love-bomb and hug our distressed child

tightly? Should we walk away and leave them to stew in their own juices? Worse still – what if we 'break' our child by choosing the wrong option?

## POSITIVE BEHAVIOUR SUPPORT

Fortunately, things become a lot clearer and a lot easier to deal with when we realise that despite all the answers, there is only one question that matters. And this question forms the basis of what we call positive behaviour support.

This is an approach where we put the child having the difficulties at the centre of the solution. It encourages us to look beyond the behaviour. What the behaviour is doesn't really matter. The age of the child doesn't matter either.

Whether our baby is biting another baby in crèche; our toddler is screaming in the car for his forgotten teddy; or our teenage daughter is heading out the door wearing a hairband for a skirt, one question should guide us and steer us to

the best solution: "What are you REALLY saying to me right now?"

## ASK YOURSELF SOME QUESTIONS

Before we even ask this about our child, we need to stop and ask some questions of ourselves – why is this behaviour upsetting me so much right at this moment? Perhaps, I'm rushed and need to get them off to school? Maybe I'm mortified about what other people must be thinking? Or I'm worried that my teenage son or daughter may be putting themselves in a vulnerable position? Knowing where we're coming from puts us in a much better frame of mind to see where the child is coming from.

> **Listen:** Once we have a better understanding of where we're coming from, it's time to put ourselves in our child's shoes. The adult world has a lot of pressures that sometimes our children just can't appreciate. But emotionally, in their view of the world, their concerns are just as valid as ours.

Maybe the baby is upset because their favourite carer in crèche is having snuggles with another baby. Maybe the toddler is deeply concerned that Teddy is home alone and missing out on this exciting trip. Maybe our teenage daughter is feeling like a social pariah amongst her cool friends for not exposing her midriff on a cold winter's night.

Clearly, with our many years of life experience behind us, we know that Teddy missing a trip, or wearing clothes that cover up more than 45% of our flesh is survivable in the great game of life. But whether you're four months, four years or 14 years of age, this may feel like the end of the world.

> **Meet in the middle:** So how can we acknowledge what our child sees as a catastrophe and reconcile this with a bit of our grown-up common sense? We do this by listening carefully for the REAL message our child is telling us (whilst trying to ignore the fact that they're 'telling us' by smearing jam on the curtains).

We need to listen beyond the words as sometimes the words might be misleading – younger children don't always have the right words; and older children may need coaxing to actually confirm anything. You may have to take a Sherlock Holmes approach and look for the evidence – what happened before the child got upset, was something else going on, or when was the last time they ate or had a nap?

Once we can hear the real message, consider if we can meet them in the middle this time. If we're not too far from home, maybe we could turn around and get Teddy? Perhaps our daughter can go out in the skirt (and preferably some opaque tights), but dad WILL be waiting outside in the car at 10:30pm.

> **Support:** Sometimes we find ourselves in a situation where it's simply not an option to compromise. At these times, we need to let the child know that we do hear them, but can't allow them to have what it is they want for their own good right

now. The child probably won't like it, and isn't likely to calm down immediately.

But acknowledging their concerns will help everybody recover from the current situation and resolve it more quickly and effectively than using the naughty step, a time-out or a grounding. There's also a better chance of opening the lines of communication in the aftermath than if we'd waded in with a punishment.

> **Preventing future meltdowns:** But if we do JUST this, we could be in deep trouble. We could be seen as the push-over, or the parent who can be won over by turning on the water-works. This does nothing to help us in the long term.

This is where positive behaviour support comes into its own. Using these 'meet-in-the-middle' techniques, we have hopefully survived the immediate meltdown, with some dignity left intact on both sides, and (if we're lucky), still on talking terms. Now that the initial storm has passed, the real work of preventing it from happening again begins.

### YOU HAVE TO PRACTISE THIS TO GET SOMEWHERE

Unfortunately, positive behaviour support is not magical fairy dust that stops every meltdown in its tracks, and it won't perform miracles, nice as that would be. There are times in the heat of the moment that our child may not be ready to rationalise and meet us half-way.

Let's face it, there are times when we're not able to rationalise particularly well, and we may not react as calmly as we would wish. But like anything, the more we practise it, the easier it gets. Once we get into the habit of looking past the immediate crisis and listening for the message, we find ourselves better able to deal with meltdowns in a way that lets the child know that they are being listened to. Then we can manage situations in a way that promotes mutual respect and helps parent and child reach a collaborative resolution and prevent meltdowns from happening again.

### It's all about 'EaSE'ing our way into it:

> **Ea = Environmental arrangement:**

How do we set up our child's environment to prevent future meltdowns? Perhaps we have a 'travelling-bear' (with multiple replacements to allow for inevitable losses) that lives only in the car, so he never gets forgotten or left home alone?

Perhaps we could think about broadening our teenager's social horizons by encouraging them towards scouts, sports or other community activities where there may be more to occupy them than the length of a skirt?

Think about what the child was trying to say when they were upset, and ways to try to prevent these problems from coming up again. Try to build time into the day to check in with them before problems come up – the car is a great opportunity to do this without distractions.

> **S = Skills:** What new skills might our child need so they can manage things better? Perhaps they need to learn ways of playing games on their own for a short period of time. Perhaps they need to learn how to be allowed out late responsibly, e.g. phoning home and getting a cab home with a friend.

> **E = Encourage:** We want to encourage young people to be good citizens that we're proud of. The key lies in the old adage "catch 'em being good". Are they getting our full attention only when things go wrong, or do they get recognition when they've pulled their weight in the house, done something nice for a sibling, shared their toys, or spent some time helping out a neighbour?