Orderly Assessment **1** to Successful Intervention

Where Do You Start? Where Do You End Up?

Oh my gosh! I can't believe she could do that! You wouldn't think something that big could fit into something that small! Okay . . . it's discipline time. Time to do the old discipline thing . . . or is it, the new discipline thing?

Where do I start? How do I start? Reason with her? Distract? Do expectations? Trick? Motivate? Coerce? Punish? Threaten?

Wait . . . what's the tantrum all about anyway? A maturity thing? Circumstances? Fatigue? Hunger? Getting sick? A disruption? Personality? Are we all nuts? Is there something wrong or off? Did the devil make her do it?

It's not just discipline time! It's the daily discipline detective time!

IN LOVE WITH YOUR HAMMER

What happens when you fall in love with your hammer? Everything starts looking like a nail! Bam! Bam! Bam! Many people discipline with one technique or from one perspective only. The perspective may differ among adults, but they have in common the assumption that there is only one

reason for the behavior or misbehavior. Therefore, only one approach or discipline is necessary. A significant percentage of parents of preschoolers use corporal punishment to discipline their children, despite the spankings not working to eliminate the behavior! Straus and Stewart (1999) report that the use of corporal punishment reaches its peak at 94 percent at the ages of 3 and 4 years. Straus (1994) interviewed 270 individuals regarding their experience of the year they received corporal punishment the most, which was around age eight. Barely half felt that the corporal punishment was effective. In addition, spanking became less effective as they grew older. Forty-two percent reported hating their parents for the spanking. Rather than arguing whether spanking is appropriate and/or can be effective discipline, of concern are parents who continue to spank despite it clearly not being effective. Such parents may have stuck with spanking because this may have been their original model from their childhood and there had been little reexamination of more appropriate or more effective discipline. Someone will ask me, "Is it OK if I _____ my child?" My normal response is, "Does it work?" A common response is, "Well . . . not really." Then I throw up my hands in mock exasperation and ask, "Then why are you asking me if it's OK!?" Dakota tribal wisdom says, "When you discover that you are riding a dead horse, the best strategy is to dismount and get a different horse." Not only are people stuck in applying discipline that does not work, they seek permission to continue riding that dead horse! "Is it okay if I ignore my tantruming child, even though she gets even more distraught?" "Is it okay if I hug the tantruming child, even though he pushes me away and continues screaming?" "Is it OK to spank if it doesn't work with my child?" No! It isn't OK! On another level, when individuals claim that a technique works, the next examination needs to be on the accompanying costs and effects. Straus and Stewart (1999) are among researchers who find many major harmful effects from using corporal punishment. Discipline techniques are tools to deal with behavioral issues. As with all tools, they can be properly or improperly applied to a task. A tool may not be effective for the task or may work for the task while damaging it. You can use a hammer to drive a screw into wood, but both the screw and the wood will be damaged. A tool chest contains many different tools. One does not randomly reach into the toolbox and grab just any tool. A parent or teacher must judiciously choose the appropriate approach, tool, or intervention to address the discipline or behavioral issue at hand. Children are far more precious than screws. Don't screw up!

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ASSESSMENT, NOT ASSUMPTIONS

Distinguish common behavioral issues with more complex or more severe and less common challenges. If problems persist, professional consultation is highly recommended, as opposed to hoping that children will "grow out of it." Be sure to find the right professional. Although many parents turn to their children's pediatricians, their expertise is primarily in medical health and physical development. Early childhood educators, teachers and other educators, developmental specialists, neurologists, speech and language professionals, mental health professionals, vocational therapists, and other specialists are often more appropriate to consult depending on your child's issues. Various individuals focus understanding children's temper tantrums by identifying situations or triggers. Janet Lawrence (2007), whose expertise includes experience raising a child with autism, gives a list of situations when the child may throw a temper tantrum. Some of the situations are self-evident and relevant to nonautistic children, whereas others may be unique to her or a child with autism:

1. Getting dressed for school
2. The kitchen guessing game
3. The car ride—the child safety seat, going backward
4. The car trip through town
5. Public places
6. Helium balloons
7. Potty training
8. The doctor's office
9. A one-track mind
10. Perfectionism

School psychologist Robert Harrington (2004) writes,

[T]here are predictable situations that can be expected to trigger temper tantrums, such as bedtime, suppertime, getting up, getting dressed, bath time, watching TV, parent talking on the phone, visitors at the house, family visiting another house, car rides, public places, family activities involving siblings, interactions with peers, and playtime. Other settings include transitions between activities, on the school bus, getting ready to work, interactions with other children, directives from the teacher, group activities, answering questions in class, individual seat work, and the playground. (p. 1)

The Web site MamasHealth.com (2007) offers a list of "What Triggers a Temper Tantrum?":

- . . . [being] inadequate in their abilities to master a new toy or activity
- not [being] allowed to wear clothing they prefer, or eat and drink what they want
- overstimulation
- being confined in a car seat or stroller for a long period of time
- denial of a request
- being separated from something or someone they love
- a change in their routine

Although there is validity in naming situations and triggers, there are no comprehensive lists, nor are they necessarily applicable to the tantrums of other children, teenagers, and adults. Similar and dissimilar issues or a combination of issues might trigger the different tantrums listed. A "magic wand" solution is not available, and smacking all tantrums with a hammer approach is dangerous. These and other triggers and situations, however, can be conceptualized into categories or theories of factors that guide prevention and intervention of temper tantrums. The following hierarchy of factors or theories can help one understand a particular child's behavior and may also be considered areas of potential issues that ignite temper tantrums.

AN ORDERLY APPROACH FOR UNDERSTANDING BEHAVIOR

1 year old, 3 years old, 6 years old, 10 years old, 13 years old, 17 years old. . . 44 years old!?

1. Development ⟶ **2. Situation**
Two kids and
one toy!
⟶ **3. Physical condition**
Sick, tired,
or hungry?

4. Disruption ⟶ **5. Temperament**
happy happy **happy**
angry angry **angry**
sad sad **sad**
⟶ **6. Systemic**

7. Specific conditions ⟶ **8. Moral**
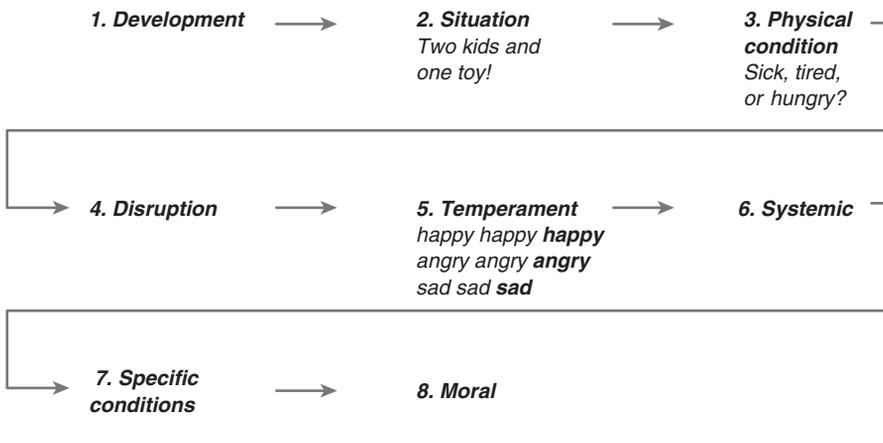
This hierarchy was developed for parents, teachers, and social services profes-
sionals who requested a systematic process to understand the motivations
behind child and adult behavior. Children may exhibit the same behavior for
any of several different reasons or from some combination of reasons. For
example, a child may act out due to fatigue, poor modeling, impulsiveness,
frustration, and so forth. Although it is usually necessary to set boundaries
regarding a behavior, adults also need to
understand the factors that cause the
behavior in the first place. Punishment
may stop the child's immediate behavior,
but the behavior may repeat. Underlying
issues that continue to exist may erupt into

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tantrums. Each of these eight sets of factors, issues, or theories may be con-
sidered areas in which poor response by adults can ignite a temper tantrum.

The orderly assessment or diagnostic process starts from a develop-
mental perspective to progressively higher levels of concern. For many
children, several issues may apply. Some people have a favorite theory to
explain why children behave and, as a result, always look to that theory
for guidance. Although some people love a particular technique (e.g., the
hammer), other people love a particular perspective (e.g., hammering)
that explains everything for them. In *The Great Santini,* a movie (Carlino,
1979) based on a novel by Pat Conroy (1976), Robert Duval plays a
Marine Corps fighter pilot who believes in military discipline not only in
his military life but also in his family life. When he applies this concept to
relationships with his wife and children, they suffer great pain, discon-
nection, and disruption. One teacher may discipline children from the per-
spective of setting boundaries and punishing negative behavior. That
teacher assumes that once the child is punished for violating a boundary,
the behavior will stop. Another teacher may think that the child is acting
out to attract nurturing attention. That teacher gives big hugs, with the
expectation that the need for nurturing will be satisfied and the negative
behavior eliminated. These responses may be intervention without assess-
ment and may prove ineffective. They do not consider other possible
relevant issues (e.g., the child has high energy, may be distractible, is a six-
year-old who has started kindergarten a year late, may be tired, plays a lot
of violent video games, has emotionally neglectful parents, is in a poorly
managed and crowded classroom, may be frustrated because of a learning
disability, and is overexcited because it's almost Christmas). Both teachers
could have missed possible relevant theories about hyperactivity, attention
deficit, development, fatigue, social modeling, family dynamics, environ-
mental influences, learning disabilities, or sensory thresholds relevant to
this child's behavior. Teachers may continue unsuccessful interventions

with a whole slew of negative consequences. One underlying theory may be more convenient, but it is neither appropriate nor effective if it's a dead horse. Pull out the entire tool chest! There is no single tool or magic wand that will "presto-chango" solve all the problems.

PLURALITAS NON EST PONENDA SINE NECCESITATE

Some parents or teachers cherry-pick the issues that they feel they can handle and ignore the ones that are challenging or uncomfortable. For example, if unfamiliar with recognizing and handling learning disabilities, they may ignore helping the child to compensate for the disabilities. Teachers may be defensive about their classroom structure and excessive levels of noise and activity. If uncomfortable with confronting family dysfunction that affects children's behavior, they work in isolation from the home influences. The teacher can easily become more and more frustrated. The child will feel negativity from the teacher and also be frustrated from failing in the classroom. The child may act out and or throw temper tantrums. Each of these issues and other factors become potential tantrum igniters when handled poorly by adults. The first four sets of issues are very commonsensical but sometimes forgotten when adults are under stress. Some adults have a tendency to make things more complicated than necessary.

> '*Pluralitas non est ponenda sine neccesitate*' or 'plurality should not be posited without necessity.' The words are those of the medieval English philosopher and Franciscan monk William of Occam (ca. 1285–1349). . . . What is known as Occam's razor was a common principle in medieval philosophy and was not originated by William, but because of his frequent usage of the principle, his name became linked to it. (Carroll, 2006, ¶ 1–2)

A more modern and blunt version would be the K.I.S.S. principle—Keep It Simple, don't be Stupid! Sometimes, teachers or parents scare themselves with more complex and convoluted theories about behavior, when very often, a simpler perspective may be adequate. If you have a headache, for example, it may be prudent to drink a glass of water because of possible dehydration rather than scheduling surgery for a brain tumor! Keep It Simple—you can be Successful. Keep It Simple, don't Scare yourself! The following are the eight factors or issues:

1. Developmental factors (including life-cycle issues for adults)

2. Situational factors (other children, colleagues, availability of toys and/or resources)

3. Physical factors

4. Disruptional factors (from specific circumstance)

5. Temperamental factors

6. Systemic factors (environmental or ecological)

7. Specific or specialized factors

8. Moral factors

The first two sets of issues (a total of six), when forgotten, cause people to move too quickly and dangerously into the last two issues. The last two issues or theories can, if applied too quickly, cause problems for everyone. If parents or teachers understand the behavior's cause as normal or expected, there is a high tolerance for the behavior and general acceptance. If they do not recognize or accept the issue or factor as relevant, the tolerance can be much lower and the judgment highly negative. I present more extensively about the factors and issues underneath behavior or the igniters of temper tantrums. Clarifying how important these issues are to children significantly aids dealing with tantrums in the present and the long term. Adults get away with inefficient and conceptually unsound methods of handling the tantrums of babies and very young children. However as children get older, the sloppiness of the adult tantrum response is exposed, and adults eventually run into enraged adolescents who were failed as toddlers and younger children when they tantrumed. Dr. Les Parrott (2000) writes,

> the anger of adolescents is like a buoyant basketball forced under water: hard to sit on. When the delicate balance required to hold it down is disturbed, adolescent anger comes rushing to the surface and explodes into the environment. In children we call it a temper tantrum, but the same experience can be seen in many adolescents. When a fit of anger is provoked in adolescents, the reaction may be almost volcanic in intensity. . . . While tantrums are expected in young children (ages two to four years), destructive rage is out of bounds for adolescents. Often adolescents who throw tantrums have benefited from them by watching their parents raise the white flag of surrender in the face of angry fits. (p. 83)

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Anger from being ignored, dismissed, and frustrated is held down by adult intimidation and young children's lack of mobility and resources.

Adolescent mobility and access to other (including peer) resources breaks the balance. Teen behavior can become explosive, when adults can no longer get away with inefficient and now ineffective discipline. This comment on toddler behavior is actually a warning: "Some call this stage the terrible twos and others call it first adolescence because the struggle for independence is similar to what is seen during adolescence" (Harrington, 2004, p. 2). Catching tantrums and handling them successfully when children are younger become critical in avoiding the retreat and surrender adults face as children become older and bigger—as they eventually become teenagers struggling for independence and the out-of-control adults who do not value interdependence in the community. Tantrums occur and must be dealt with during the first adolescence of toddlers and the regular adolescence. They occur and must be handled in relationships in the extended adolescence of the twenties and the double teens . . . and at ages forty-sixteen and seventy-eighteen! They may occur in different sizes and in various guises, but they will erupt. Temper tantrums are part of life and relationships, but we don't have to surrender to their potential destructive forces.

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CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS

- Many people persist with one discipline technique from one perspective or theory for understanding behavior, whether or not it works.

- Tantrum triggers and situations can be put into categories or theories of factors for an orderly assessment process that guides prevention and intervention.

- Adults can scare themselves with more complex and convoluted theories about behavior, rather than starting with more simple interpretations that may be effective.

- Developmental factors, situational factors, physical condition, emotional condition, temperamental factors, environmental and ecological factors, pathology, and morality are eight perspectives for assessing children's behavior.

- Adults can get away with inappropriate discipline for younger children in their "first adolescence" struggle for independence, but eventually, enraged adolescents expose the ineffectiveness with explosive behavior.