

When Toddlers Get Upset

Submitted by Sarah Fitz-Claridge on 7 August, 2003 - 23:41

Alice Bachini

Taking children seriously is about more than not deliberately hurting them. It's about helping them learn good things, protecting them from bad things and enabling them safely to develop the knowledge they need for their next set of problems (interests and challenges). And taking toddlers seriously seems to me as complex and challenging or more so than taking kids seriously at any other age, in a very general sense, for various reasons: most of society is not set up to accommodate them in sensible ways (would you want to spend two hours tied into your chair eating chicken nuggets?); most adults don't especially enjoy sharing toddler activities particularly much (depending on the toddler activities – Noddy jigsaws no thanks, but I can watch Terminator 2 quite a few times and still enjoy it); toddlers need a lot of ongoing constant help with simple things like using the toilet, finding bits of lego between the floorboards etc, which is frankly not most people's idea of fun most of the time; and toddlers aren't always brilliant at expressing their ideas verbally, which is still adults' favourite form of communication. Erm, certain other forms notwithstanding.

So, all in all, life as a toddler-parent can get tough. And there are no times tougher than When Toddlers Get Upset. The train is coming into the station, you've got to get on, and Toddler decides he wants to buy another kit-kat right now, from the station café, because (who knows why?) he liked the wallpaper and the general vibe and feels like repeating the whole kit-kat buying experience he had five minutes ago. Or, you're all set to go swimming, everyone's ready to dive in the pool, and Toddler notices there is a cat outside on the grass which he wants to stroke, and disagrees that by the time you've got your towels on and staggered out into the snow dripping with fast-forming icicles it will probably be gone anyway. Toddlers are optimistic little people. They have an innate understanding that the impossible can be achieved. They seem inherently TCS. They won't accept failure for an answer. And quite often, the harsh realities of life and train-timetables and parents being slow, dumb and useless do get to them and feel to them like tragedy.

So, what should parents do When Toddlers Get Upset?

1. Be comforting and kind and affectionate and friendly,
2. Keep trying to solve the problem if possible (toddler losing interest in the problem and moving onto something else more interesting counts as solving the problem, generally)

Do not:

1. Try to make the entire world fit the immediate demands of the toddler even when the consequences are dire. There is no need for all your housemates to have their central-heating system expensively destroyed by an inquisitive engineer. If you fail to find better alternatives, you fail: don't help your child wipe all the files of your friend's computer just because you couldn't find him anything more fun that particular minute. It's bad.
2. Make a big deal out of it all, start weeping or stressing yourself, bemoan the horribly primitive state of the world that forced you into these corners, get bogged down in the moment- toddlers are very good at moving on incredibly fast and forgetting accidents and grudges, and this is a useful skill we can learn from them.

And finally: don't panic! These things happen. Kids get over them, the world won't end and, even if it really was all your fault for not allowing enough time in the station buffet (criticise your decisions, make a mental note, do better next time), you didn't deliberately try to attack your child into good behaviour (as most other people do). You just messed up a bit this time. How are we all going to learn things if we don't make any mistakes, might I ask?

So, that's what to do When Toddlers Get Upset.

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Comments

When toddlers get upset

Submitted by Soho mum (not verified) on 22 November, 2006 - 14:25

I really loved this article - someone out there seems to know my two-year old son very well!

For me, though, sometimes the worst part of toddler upsets are the responses of other adults, who so often want to label as 'naughty' or 'disruptive' or 'out of control' a little boy who is just pursuing some goal that seems perfectly reasonable and interesting to him at the moment. Maybe I need to develop a thicker skin about whether other people think I'm a terrible mother!

But on the other hand, what about when people one can't totally ignore (relatives, old friends, health care professionals etc) start talking darkly about the need for 'boundaries' and 'discipline'? What do you say to them? (I should add that this isn't in cases where a child has actually harmed anything or anyone - rather, just when the child is being quite emphatic about what s/he wants in a situation where other people would quite obviously prefer hir to act invisible - as most people seem to want toddlers to be, most of the time. And needless to say, I have no desire for my child to be invisible.)

All helpful hints very much appreciated.

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About the phrase "without intentional coercion"

Submitted by mammal_mama on 10 January, 2007 - 02:09

I actually wondered if this phrase -- used in the context of stating the TCS philosophy that it's possible and desirable to raise children without intentional coercion -- could at least partially apply to those situations where a toddler's heading for something destructive and the parent can't get the child interested in ANYthing else and ends up having to just scoop her up and remove her from the situation?

The parent truly WANTS to find a common preference that will keep this little one (or the cat or the friend's baby that her child is roughly handling) safe, while still making her child happy, even happier than she was in the previous harmful activity -- but can't find the common preference quick enough as the situation requires immediate intervention. So we intervene first to prevent harm, and find the common preference later. In these cases can we say (to ourselves) that we're not being INTENTIONALLY coercive -- or is this just a cop-out?

Susan

to post comments

In response to Susan's

Submitted by a passerby (not verified) on 5 May, 2008 - 23:33

In response to Susan's comment:

I think it might be useful to keep in mind Noam Chomsky's idea of justified coercion. Chomsky is an anarchist, and obviously against intentional and unjustified coercion (whatever other problems one may have with him), and yet he finds it acceptable to seize a child in imminent harm. His explanation was this:

"I think it only makes sense to seek out and identify structures of authority, hierarchy, and domination in every aspect of life, and to challenge them; unless a justification for them can be given, they are illegitimate, and should be dismantled, to increase the scope of human freedom. That includes political power, ownership and management, relations among men and women, parents and children...**the burden of proof has to be placed on authority, and it should be dismantled if that burden cannot be met. Sometimes the burden can be met. If I'm taking a walk with my grandchildren and they dart out into a busy street, I will use not only authority but also physical coercion to stop them. The act should be challenged, but I think it can readily meet the challenge.** And there are other cases; life is a complex affair, we understand very little about humans and society, and grand pronouncements are generally more a source of harm than of benefit. But the perspective is a valid one, I think, and can lead us quite a long way."

Sometimes, coercive power is justified. It is simply very very rarely justified. As long as we are constantly challenging and interrogating our own relationships with our children and removing unnecessary control and coercion, I think we are on the right path.

Because you're right, a parent in that situation is not intentionally coercing, or at least not intentionally DOMINATING.

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