

MEG'S MONTHLY THOUGHTS

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A little one starts screaming and crying in a shopping center - it is an easy assumption to make "They're just throwing a tantrum; it's what they do at that age." You might be surprised. The melodramatic explosion of emotions might not be a tantrum, but something that is referred to as a sensory meltdown. A Tantrum and a Sensory Meltdown may appear to look very similar, but in fact are two very different things. With this in mind, let us have a look at these two terrors - often labeled as a parent's worst nightmare.

TANTRUMS:

Tantrums often present as outbursts of emotion encompassing frustration, rage, banging and screams that can make a mom or dad want to run for the hills. A tantrum is purpose driven and usually occurs when a little one wants something that they cannot have. Tantrums can even be attention based, with the little one even going as far as pausing to check if anyone is watching. Tantrums typically begin in toddlerhood and is according to A. Mikami, an associate professor



toddlerhood and is according to Amori Mikami, an associate professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of British Columbia, a developmentally appropriate strategy to test limits.

SENSORY MELTDOWN:

A sensory meltdown often occurs as the result of a little one having too much sensory information to process. Everything we experience throughout the day (sounds, sight, touch etc.) is sensory information. These components are all absorbed and processed at the same time. Too much sensory information can easily become too much to handle and then the "fight or flight" system kicks in with the response establishing itself as what appears to be a tantrum. The important thing to remember here is that a meltdown is involuntary and not purpose-driven like a tantrum. Sensory meltdowns are also often related to anxiety.

Seeing as tantrums and sensory meltdowns are two different things, it should be taken into consideration that these two behaviours should be dealt with in different ways.

Let us have a look at the antidotes.

THIS ISSUE'S FEATURED ARTICLE:

TANTRUMS VS
SENSORY MELTDOWNS

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THE TANTRUM ANTIDOTE:

Tantrums stop for two reasons. When the child gets what they want, or when they are rewarded for better behaviour. Seeing as a tantrum's purpose is to test limits and establish safe boundaries, it is important that the first option of getting what they want does not become the norm. It also has to be taken into consideration that a little one at the tantrum-throwing age is not equipped with the knowledge to identify what exactly it is that they are feeling, and how to feel it appropriately. It is here where the adult guidance comes in. It is important to create awareness relating to limits and boundaries from as early as the age of one.

With boundaries and limitations in place, the second step is to help your little one develop an image of the self and all the emotions that one may experience. When a tantrum occurs, it is important to acknowledge the emotion that is experienced and not dismiss it -

“Wow, I can see that you are so angry and upset right now”, “it is okay to be upset”. Then remind them about the boundary or limitation that was set - “but you cannot have the sweet now, because you haven't eaten your food yet”. In the case that your little one is too upset, remove them from the situation, let the tantrum take its course, and as soon as he/she has calmed down, go through the emotion-acknowledging chat with reinforcing of boundaries again. When you help your little one to label a big emotion and show pure empathy (e.g. ‘Wow, you are super angry right now. “We all have emotions. It is okay to have big emotions, but what you do with them is important. Therefore, feeling mad is fine. Hitting and kicking are not okay”). If you as a parent are consistent, your little one will learn that tantrums do not work and they will stop throwing them, says Gail Bell, co-founder of Parenting Power, a Calgary-based parenting resource. With this technique, you also teach your little one to live out their emotions in an appropriate way that is not disruptive or destructive towards anyone else.

THE SENSORY MELTDOWN ANTIDOTE:

A meltdown ends either when the child tires out, or when there is a change in the sensory input. When your little one is presenting with a meltdown, it is important that you remember to stop and think how he/she is feeling - completely overwhelmed. Therefore, the antidote here is to remove your little one from the overwhelming setting or situation to somewhere quieter, darker and less stimulating. At the same time it is important to monitor your voice while calming them and reassuring them that they have not done anything wrong. By limiting the amount of sensory input that they receive at that moment you help their sensory system to calm down. As your little one gets older you can teach them more advance techniques for self-regulation such as deep breathing or repeating a calming sentence like “I'm very upset right now but this too shall pass”. This helps to ensure that they master big emotions (with it becoming a lifelong skill).

Make sure to identify what it is that your little one is experiencing before you put them into the tantrum box. Once you know what it is, you can administer the antidote, however, always remember - your little one is developing and still discovering emotions that you as an adult already know. Teach them, help them right in cases where emotions are lived out inappropriately and make sure to let them know that you always love them.

