

# When Mom Has a Temper Tantrum

By Melanie Howard

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Each month, my five-year-old son's kindergarten class compiles a "book of days," in which the children share their daily home experiences with one another. The next month, the book gets circulated to all the parents. Imagine my chagrin when James brought last month's book home, and there—between "Mollie and her mom made brownies" and "Jeremy helped his dad take out the trash"—was "James's mom was angry with him this morning." My temper, in writing, laminated and distributed for all the world to see.

Worse yet, I realized that almost all our recent mornings had degenerated into Mommy screamathons over seemingly minor matters—dawdling, misplaced gloves, sibling bickering. I felt terrible, and obviously James did, too. How could we break this angry pattern?

"Yelling is usually a sign that a parent has no strategy," says Thomas Phelan, a clinical psychologist in Glen Ellyn, Illinois, and the author of the popular 1-2-3 Magic: Effective Discipline for Children 2-12 (Child Management, Inc.). At a loss for what to do, moms may resort to yelling out of anger or frustration. But the end result is that parents feel guilty and children get the emotional message that they are bad.

It's because we love our children so dearly that they are able to provoke such strong feelings of anger in us, according to Nancy Samalin, a New York City-based parent educator and the author of *Love and Anger: The Parental Dilemma* (Penguin Paperbacks). But that doesn't make expressing that anger through hollering or put-downs appropriate—or effective. Samalin, who has conducted workshops for parents of toddlers through teens for more than 25 years, says the key is to feel and acknowledge your emotions but not let them control you and make you act irrationally.

Samalin and Phelan recommend drawing on these following strategies when your kids are driving you up the wall:

- **Exit or wait.** When you feel your anger getting the better of you, briefly withdraw from the situation until you calm down, Samalin writes in *Love and Anger*. Phelan agrees: He suggests stepping out of the room, counting to ten, going to your bedroom, and closing the door—whatever it takes to restore your cool.
- **"I," not "you."** Avoid attacking your child with "you" statements—"You are such a slob!" or "You'll never learn." Instead, think in terms of "I": "I don't like picking clothes up off your floor every day" or "I get upset when we're not on time." These are less hurtful and inflammatory.
- **Put it in writing.** If you are too angry to speak, don't. If your child is old enough to read, express your feelings in writing. Sometimes just the time required to find pen and paper will help you to cool off.

- **Stay in the present.** When your child makes you angry, don't work yourself into a tizzy by listing every offense he has committed in the past week and is likely to commit in the future. Stick to the issue at hand.
- **Restore good feelings.** When you do lose it, reconnect with your child as soon as possible. That may mean saying you're sorry and giving a hug and kiss to a younger child. For an older child, you may want to offer an explanation of why you were angry along with an apology. Don't worry that apologizing will diminish your authority—it won't. It shows your child that you respect him and teaches him that everyone can be wrong sometimes.
- **Recognize what the problem is.** Is it really your child's messy room? Or are you sleep-deprived? Feeling overwhelmed at work? Mad at your husband or mother or boss? Be aware of when you are more vulnerable to anger and resist the urge to transfer negative feelings to your child.
- **Make yourself—and all family members—accountable for lashing out.** Institute a "no losing it" rule to make kids and parents aware of the times they go ballistic. But do it with a light touch. For instance, make a chart and tack on a sticker when one of you has an outburst. If one family member is accumulating a lot of stickers, it's time to talk about it.
- **Carry a tape recorder.** When you feel yourself about to blow, turn it on. If you explode anyway, play back the tape and imagine yourself as the child on the receiving end.
- **Use cognitive therapy.** This technique is sometimes used to calm fearful fliers. Analyze your thoughts and put them in perspective—or, as Phelan puts it, "deawfulize" the situation. (Fliers learn that their fear is of crashing, not flying. And since crashing is unlikely, their fear is not reasonable.) Ask yourself—when your children are fighting, say—if it's really that horrible. Think of the situation as aggravating but normal behavior that merits a calm, rational parental response.

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