



# Temper, Temper

## Managing Your Child's and Your Own

By Kay Kosak Abrams, Ph.D.

Dear Dr. Kay,

I am a stay-at-home mom of three children, ages 6, 4 and 2. My husband is strictly a weekend dad. I run out of emotional and physical reserves sometimes, and I rant and rave at the kids and my husband. My 4-year-old, Peter, has difficulty controlling his temper, too. He throws rages when he is frustrated and cannot use his words. He is so stubborn lately, refusing to do things, like washing his hands or getting dressed in the morning in order to get to school! I am questioning whether my expectations for Peter are too much. How do I deal with his rage tantrums and my own?

Dear Parent,

When it comes to managing our children, we have to step back and examine what might be wrong with the big picture. You have three young children to manage. To hear that you are running out of fuel leaves me wondering about your resources for support, such as family, friends and community.

Parenting is a full-time job, and we have to get suited up to face the job each day. That means preparing our minds, hearts and bodies. Taking care of yourself is key. Are you getting sufficient sleep and exercise? Are you eating a healthy diet? Do you find time to connect with friends and neighbors? What tasks or goals can you compromise as you prioritize what best maximizes your strengths as a parent?

I often remind parents to prepare for their job every evening and every morning, just as they would do if they were managing employees or teaching students. Assess your day and your week. Look at your agenda, and consider how to be efficient and re-



alistic. Most important, know yourself and each child, with respect to how much you each can manage.

Moms and dads often have great intuition about their children. You are describing a sense of pressure as you inquire about unreasonable expectations for Peter. Children may become noncompliant for any number of reasons, but certainly too much stress can result in excessive tantrums. Sometimes, a simple adjustment of the schedule can have a positive impact on the temperament of the household.

Regarding tempers and anger management, here is an exercise to help you and Peter work on managing frustration and anger.

- Take a small poster board and draw a thermometer. Place the numbers 0 to 10 next to the thermometer. Keep the area that is designated 0-2 white, 3-5 pink, 6-8 red and 9-10 dark red.

- Next to the numbers, in a separate column, draw simple faces. In the 0-2 range, it is a simple calm face. In the 3-5 range, the face has a bit of a frown for annoyance or irritation. In the 6-8 range, the face is mad, and in the 9-10 range, the face has a really rageful expression.

- Next, let family members discuss the column of words that will go next to the column of faces. So, for example, next to the 0-2, calm face, write the word "calm." Next to the 3-5, write "annoyed," or whatever word you might use when describing some frustration. The 6-8 is "mad" or "angry," and the 9-10 can be something absurd, like "zonkers" or "steaming."

- Explain the different levels of anger any of us can feel. Also explain how we can find solutions and think clearly when in the 3-5 range. When we get mad, in the red range that is rated 6-8, we need to work to get calmer. Discuss ways to calm down in order to think and reason.

- Talk to Peter about the rageful "crazy" and "steaming" stage when screaming happens. This is a kind of anger that is like a hot stove or a lightning bolt. Use whatever images work to convey the fact that the brain cannot stop firing "red hot" signals. Let him know that this makes it impossible to solve problems with reason.

- During a calmer time, inform Peter about how you will manage him if his temper heightens to the dark red "danger" zone. You may need to let him know you will remove yourself and/or

wait for his storm to pass, but you will not engage with him in any other way.

- You may ask Peter, while he is calm, what would help him to move his temper back down from a 9 to a 6.

- It is fine to offer a quiet room or a beanbag chair. It is fine to allow a child to scream somewhere else until he is done. Simply make it clear that such behavior will not result in rewards. You will resume engaging with him when his temper is back down to the pink zone (4 or 5).

- Be extremely careful not to accidentally reinforce a tantrum by appeasing your child in response to the tantrum.

- This thermometer is a teaching tool. By describing the color or number to represent temper, family members may learn to moderate feelings of frustration and anger.

When it comes to getting ready in the morning and coping with tempers, try to intervene by reminding your child what he is expected to do. I call this "moving it forward." It is easier to move behavior forward before the child's temper hits

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above a 5 on the thermometer. When your child refuses to put on his jacket, rather than reacting and arguing about the jacket or offering an IF-THEN kind of threat that may escalate his opposition, you calmly state, "As soon as that jacket is on, we will head out the door and get to class in time for free play." This moves the behavior forward by shifting your son's brain from oppositional to cooperative.

Do not act as if it is more important for you than for your child to get ready on time. If you are reactive or tense, your child may get attached to getting a rise out of you. It's his tardiness, not yours.

Another way to move it forward is to emphasize the logical reward in cooperation, such as, "When you are done getting dressed, we'll have some time for our show," or "...we'll have time to throw some snowballs before we get in the car." This is far better than threats that begin with "if" and end with the threat of a loss.

Moving through each day as a full-time parent with three young children is an enormous job. Make it a top priority to take care of yourself and find ways to refuel. Delegate, use all social and economic resources and adjust expectations in order to find a balance for meeting everyone's needs without overtaxing yourself. Carrying around anger and resentment – and acting that out with your children – is a signal that you need help in the form of greater supports and less stress. You likely have taken on way more than you can handle and something needs to give.

In the end, you are in charge. You own and run the system. The only detrimental outcome is for you to feel and act out of control. Ranting and raving frequently, as chief, is a red flag for you as manager. Take the time to monitor your own needs in order to respond to your children's needs with greater calm and confidence.

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Kay Abrams is a clinical psychologist in private practice in North Bethesda. She specializes in parent consultation and manages ongoing mothers groups. Her monthly "Parenting with Confidence" Coffeehouse is the fourth Thursday evening of each month. Go to [www.kayabrams.com](http://www.kayabrams.com) for details or to send in your parenting questions.

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