

Parenting - Tantrums

"But if I attend to her when she screams, won't she just keep throwing fits?" This is a common question from parents whose young child exhibits ongoing tantrums or whose older child seems to exhibit endless 'drama'. A child in the midst of a tantrum or other big feelings needs our compassion and understanding. If the drama is ongoing, the message the child is sending is that there are emotions needing to be released that have long been held inside. If we show our child that we are threatened by their big feelings by denying or squashing them (e.g., "Stop it!"; "You can come out of your room when you are happy..."; "You're driving me nuts"; "What's the big deal?"; or "You shouldn't feel that way..."), the only lesson the child learns is that it is not alright to express big feelings because they are dangerous and must be subdued. The sooner we empathize with a child's feelings, the sooner the feelings can be released (although there may be an initial increase in feeling expression upon being given permission to really 'let it out', particularly if we have been one to squelch such expressions in the past). The parental fear of being controlled or manipulated by the child's crying or feelings is rooted in unresolved pain from the parents' past and is not the fault of the child. So, when your child or teenager is in the midst of big feelings related to an interaction with you or someone else (such as a sibling or friend), resist the urge to control/fix the situation or stop the expression. Make empathetic statements without increasing the drama. Try to gain as much understanding as you can, even if the child's pain is about something that can't be changed (such as having to leave the park, being jealous that a little brother is better at sports, or expressing disappointment about losing a toy). Your child will feel safe and connected to you in his expression. He will see that big feelings are nothing to fear and will move through them to a place of peace.