

HOW CHILDREN HANDLE FRUSTRATION

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"How do I get my young child to tolerate frustration? Even a little frustration upsets him, and as a result, he frequently acts out and misbehaves. What can I say or do to encourage my child to become more patient and less demanding of immediate attention?"

Many parents voice these concerns. In fact, frustrating situations occur frequently throughout our lives—in school, work, friendships, marriage, and even our relationship with our own self. Frustration is a normal part of life. But it must not be allowed to gain the upper hand. It is imperative we be able to tolerate and to cope effectively with stress and frustration if we wish to have a successful and satisfying life.

The ability to handle frustration is developed during the early years of life. This is essential if children are to cease acting out impulsively and to begin behaving in a more socially approved manner.

A young child cannot be told or taught how to tolerate stress and frustration. The child acquires this skill over time. It happens as a result of two interdependent processes that involve how parents meet their child's physical and psychosocial needs.

First, the child's basic physical requisites must be responsively and appropriately met from conception through six to eight years of age. The hunger and nutritional requirements of infants and young children should be met upon request or every two or three hours through the early years of life. Young children also demand daily opportunities for vigorous play to exercise their growing bone and tissue. In addition, they require time for sleep and rest. It is important for parents to fulfill all of these physical needs. If these needs are not satisfied, young children will cry, misbehave, and make it evident their developmentally appropriate needs have not been met.

Second, beginning in early infancy, the child's psychosocial needs must be met. Infants and young children must be able to trust that appropriate love, attention, affection, and recognition will be theirs. This trust is the result of consistently dependable, responsive parenting during the first years of life. Secure in the learned trust that his or her parents will be there to provide, the unthreatened child is able to experience new emotional ground.

Frustration Can Turn to Fear and Lead to Misbehavior

Let's examine how frustration initially takes root in a child. The more a child's fundamental needs go unmet, and the more he or she has to clamor to get them met from the outside world, the weaker will be that child's personal sense of well-being and inner emotional strength. Instead, a profound and persistent fright grows within the child. This fear develops when the child realizes the people on whom he or she must depend are not fully trustworthy.

This learned fear, which can be overwhelming, places the child on guard. The child adopts a characteristic emotional attitude of anxious concern. Although not yet able to verbalize this fear, the young child's eyes, posture, tenseness, and behavior communicate it: "How soon will I have to announce another unmet need? Will someone be there to help me? How long will I have to wait?"

Because it takes so long to get a response to his or her legitimate wants, the anxious youngster realizes it is best not to wait to experience the first slight feeling of a need. Instead, the child learns the best self-defense is to take an offensive stance. As a result, at the first hint of frustration, the child becomes more demanding. When these new demands are not met, the child's untrusting, fear-based nature becomes increasingly inflexible.

A constant state of anxiousness and defensiveness, born of unmet needs, erodes all prospects for developing the ability to tolerate frustration. From the child's point of view, it is too risky to let down his or her guard to endure, even for a short while, the frustration of an unmet need. This is one of the origins of what has come to be called "a spoiled child."

A trusting primary relationship makes all the difference. If a child experiences mild and brief periods of stress within the context of an established trusting relationship, the accompanying anxiety will not scare the child. Having that mildly frustrated need met actually serves to revalidate the child's trust. As long as the parent's behavior remains predictable, the felt frustration, although uncomfortable, will not produce fear in the child. Without fear, a child learns to tolerate periods of discomfort at times of unmet needs. However, a child who is anxious or afraid cannot learn much of anything, except to remain on guard.

The Role of Play in the Development of the Sense of Self

From early infancy, every child should have exploratory and play opportunities that are of intrinsic interest and provide appropriately increasing levels of challenge. Within the realm of play, the child encounters many opportunities that help to build his or her ability to handle frustration. Consider the example of infant Kim.

The parents of Kim place a rattle in her crib. When they do this, two strong emotions simultaneously arise. On the one hand, Kim feels a powerful excitement and desire to have the toy. At the same time, she feels distress: wanting the toy but not having it creates both excitement and frustration. Which of these feelings will influence her behavior more strongly depends on whether Kim has experienced parental love and affection since birth. If she feels secure and trusting, she will not be automatically overwhelmed by frustration. She will pursue her excitement and reach for the desired rattle. In this way, she learns it is possible to overcome any anxiety and achieve her goal. Over time, each seemingly small incident of successful self-advocacy builds within her a budding sense of self-confidence. Kim learns she can want a toy, surmount the frustrated feelings of wanting but not having it, and by her own efforts get the toy she desires.

When Kim is six months old, she begins to crawl. One day she is sitting on the floor and notices a desired rubber elephant about eight feet away. When she looks at the toy she wants, the two familiar emotions well up within her. Once again, she feels excitement combined with anxiety and frustration. However, this time the toy is not near enough for her to readily grasp it. This presents a new level of challenge. Although fairly confident in her ability to reach and grasp, she is new to the more complex skills involved in getting a toy by crawling. With courage rooted in her brief history of building self-trust, she crawls a bit awkwardly at first toward the toy. Excitement and frustration ever present, she crawls closer, her eyes intently on the toy. When she reaches her goal, she is happy and satisfied. She puts the elephant to her mouth.

Of equal importance to Kim's happiness is the significant lesson she has taught herself about her own abilities. She was able, once again, to tolerate her initial anxiety and frustration. Through her efforts, she overcame those feelings and achieved a goal that was important to her. She gained self-confidence in her ability to use a new skill. She gave herself one more bit of evidence that she can endure frustration by trusting in herself. Self-trust and the ability to withstand increasing amounts of stress are the products of many similar, small, intrinsically motivated efforts by which the child achieves personal satisfaction.

As they watched, Kim's parents may not have suspected the importance of what was happening. Neither did Kim. A youngster becomes flexible and strong, or rigid and weak, without even knowing it is happening. However, though they may not be able to name it, both

parents and children are aware—sometimes painfully so—when children show they cannot positively cope with frustrations and anxieties.

A child's secure sense of self allows him or her to tolerate frustration. Parents play an important role in fostering the child's sense of security. One way to do this is by granting the child sufficient independence.

Some parents, albeit with the best of intentions, intercede continuously in their youngster's every act. For example, unlike Kim's parents, Jose's parents do not allow their young son to crawl toward a toy several feet away on the floor. Upon recognizing Jose's interest, they immediately pick up the toy and take it to him. These parents consistently impose themselves on their child, thus preventing him from engaging with the toy. Instead of learning to tolerate frustration, he becomes angry.

Although all infants and young children need to be held and physically loved, Jose's parents hold him even when he wants to move freely. They mechanically rock and bounce him in their arms. They continuously hover over or around him. As he grows older, they constantly interject themselves and their ideas on him. His parents talk at Jose, insistently offer him food, suggest what he should do next, and repeatedly adjust his hair and clothing. As a result, young Jose feels overwhelmed.

Constant hovering and invasive, intrusive, and manipulative parenting behaviors cause a youngster to withdraw emotionally for protection. The young child's sense of self is not allowed free expression and uninterrupted development. As a result, this child's sense of self-advocacy is not put into practice. Instead of gradually becoming emotionally stronger and more capable of facing and handling frustrations, the youngster remains weak. The child develops a self-concept that is based on an inability to tolerate life's ambiguities or changes. This weakness manifests behaviorally in an insecure, inflexible dependency.

When Jose is three- or four-years-old, he may exhibit an active, fear-based protest when expected to share and behave more independently. He may demand the constant involvement of his parents. He may become upset when his parent cooks dinner, talks on the telephone, speaks to another person, or in any way draws attention away from him. These behaviors indicate Jose has not developed the self-confidence necessary to be slightly independent and tolerate frustration. This is another way in which a "spoiled child" can develop.

The Art of Parenting

The art of parenting, in some ways, is like the art of educating. Of consequence for both roles is learning how children grow and develop. Equally important is knowing the individual child's style, talents, interests, needs, tolerances, abilities, and so on. As their youngster grows and develops, parents must listen continuously with all their senses to understand the child. As a result, they can do a better job of child rearing. They will know how and when their young child is ready to have a physical need met or to have an intrinsic interest developed, extended, or elaborated. These parents monitor and adjust the kinds and amounts of novel and possibly frustrating challenges and stimulations so their child can handle them confidently and competently.

A parent who is educated about early childhood development and the unique makeup of his or her young child is aware, for example, that the child becomes more stressed and tired than usual when exposed to certain circumstances. Responding to this, the parent will provide additional opportunities for rest.

Parents cannot be perfect, nor should they be. All children will become too tired from time to time. Sometimes they will not get the food they need when they need it. Their

requirements for loving attention occasionally will be ignored. These children will feel thwarted when their requisites are not met. Nevertheless, if the frustration is not too severe or too lengthy, and if it occurs within the context of an otherwise need-satisfied life upon which they have learned to depend, no harm will come to these children.

Problems for the child, and for the parent, derive from regularly ignoring one or more developmentally normal physical or psychosocial need. Facing a consistent pattern of inadequate parental responsiveness, the child will become anxious, on edge, and wary. For such a child, the tolerance of frustration is a personal threat that mandates not letting down his or her guard. Instead, the child learns to voice needs through attention-seeking misbehavior.

Many parents discipline the misbehavior of their young child by setting strict limits. When a youngster continues to act out, the parent institutes harsh punishment. These parents set unrealistic expectations for their child. They withhold love and attention. By failing to understand that childhood behaviors, both good and bad, are determined by the status of underlying physical and psychosocial needs, these parents unwittingly add frustration to their child's life. These strategies only further convince young children to announce their unmet needs actively and aggressively through their misbehavior.

Understandably, parents and other adults find the misbehavior of young children unpleasant. However, the cries of an infant and the misbehavior of a toddler or young child are healthy and honest responses. These behaviors are a child's signals and signs. They are symptoms. They indicate that one or more normal physical and/or psychosocial developmental need has not been met and is causing the child distress.

Many parents feel relief when a child, out of despair, finally stops crying or misbehaving and becomes quiet. These parents enjoy the peace and may even feel satisfied with their parenting abilities. They have little idea how much psychological damage has occurred.

Parent-child interaction patterns established in the first years of life tend to remain stable. Both a child's ability to withstand stress and the way he or she reacts to frustrating situations have formed a definite pattern by six years of age. Nevertheless, the opportunity exists for helping a child tolerate frustration better and cope with it more positively. The key is a change in parental child-rearing patterns that is based on an empirically supported understanding of child development. This knowledge, coupled with competent guidance about how to apply it to a particular child, can correct or reduce the ill effects of previous parenting practices. The earlier this change takes place in a child's life, the more effective it will be.

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