

Discovering the Value of a Good Tantrum



Last weekend, somewhere between the collards and the spinach, the peaceful plodding of putting in our garden went wrong and I got really grumpy with my husband, Tom.

One minute we were chatting over seedlings and the next I was feeling wronged and misunderstood. After some less than helpful squabbling, Tom, brilliant man that he is, took a deep breath, looked right at me, and said, "OK, tell me all of it."

"I hate it when you judge me!" I ranted and raved. I went on recounting inconveniences that were building steam in the back of my mind as resentments. Before I knew it, I was talking about the hard look in my mother's eyes when she deemed one of my childhood accomplishments beneath her notice. He was sitting right beside me handing me a Kleenex. And I was already starting to feel better.

When I stepped into the garden half an hour before, I had had no idea all of that was brewing inside of me. If my husband hadn't stopped to pay attention and listen, I might not know it now. That gift of caring attention helped me release the feelings that were interfering with my ability to relate to Tom and feel connected and understood. I also learned some important things about myself while building a stronger sense of closeness in my marriage.

And *this is exactly what children need when they have their tantrums*. Whether you are four or forty, being human means having to deal with a lot of feelings, feelings that don't come with a time stamp. They can sneak up on you, just like Tom triggering memories of how small and insignificant I felt as a child under my mother's judgmental gaze. And we all, big and small, deserve the opportunity to share how we feel in a caring, thoughtful and non-judgmental space.





It saddens me when I hear parents proudly say they don't put up with tantrums and send their kids off to the solitary confinement of their rooms until they can behave "properly." I know they love their children, but what a lost opportunity to nurture and support them! That would be like my husband telling me, "I have no intention of loving all of you. I only want to see the parts that work for me."

We are social animals. We all need connection with others. And sometimes, when we are overwhelmed with feelings, relating "properly" gets hard to do. But opening your heart and your arms to the feelings that are overwhelming your child clears her mind, allows her to think and learn unhindered by emotional baggage and builds an essential level of trust and closeness in the relationship between you.

So, the next time your two-year-old starts to fall apart in the grocery store, just imagine I am there with you, with one arm around your shoulders saying, "Wow! You're a lucky parent. What a great chance for you guys to get closer." Maybe that will help you take a deep breath, bend down, and say, "Tell me all of it."

--Juli Idleman

