

PSYCHOLOGY

# Temper Tantrums

## A New Study of Anger in Children Analyzes the Causes Of Tantrums and Tells What Should be Done About Them

By MARJORIE VAN DE WATER

IT WAS ONE of those informal, but impressive family councils. Tommy had been indulging in temper tantrums.

"He needs a good thrashing. That would take it out of him." This was Grandfather's contribution, a conclusion drawn from a rich experience with six sons. Grandmother was more kindly.

"He has been looking pale lately. Don't you think you should give him a spring tonic?"

"I always made Edward stay in the yard for a week. If you would try that with Tommy, he'd soon get over his tantrums." This was Aunt Edith.

It was followed by an aside from Aunt Ruth—"Ed never did."

Uncle Horace was an idealist—"You should reason with the child. The boy has sense and would respond. If you treat him with corporal punishment, he will respond like a little animal. You should develop his mind."

"I'd just like to see you try to reason with Edward when he was kicking and screaming on the floor," Aunt Edith retorted acidly. She had.

Uncle Joe was the one all the children got on with nicely. His contribution came next.

"You make a whole lot out of nothing, seems to me. Why don't you just divert the child's attention. Give him a new toy or a good big candy sucker, and he'll give up his tantrum any time."

Then it was Grandfather's turn again.

"The trouble with the boy is, he's the only one. If Jenny had a few more to look after, she wouldn't be picking on Tommy all the time. When a boy is never let alone and never given his own way, it's no wonder he has tantrums."

There was no reply to this. Uncle Joe recalled that Grandfather had been like that, thrashing one time and "letting the boy alone" the next, but he said nothing. Jenny at last said:

"Oh, but I have tried all these things, one at a time and all together. I tell you they don't work."

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"That is just the trouble," said Aunt Elizabeth. "You are not consistent."

Wherever children have tempers, and many of them do, these family consultations are likely to recur. There is a certain sameness about the ideas advanced, and a great similarity about the lack of success recorded. The main difference is in the number of relatives willing to give counsel.

### Boys Worse Offenders

To aid the harassed parents of such temperish youngsters, Dr. Florence L. Goodenough, of the Institute of Child Welfare, University of Minnesota, has made a scientific study of anger in young children—what are the immediate causes of outbursts, what are the underlying causes, what methods are commonly used to suppress it, and what is the relative success of each method. These she has reported in a new book "Anger in Young Children," published by the University.

Boys are worse offenders than girls in this matter of temper, Dr. Goodenough found. She points out, however, that while this may be, as is popularly supposed, because the girls are naturally milder, it is quite possible that the reason is really that parents have different standards of behavior for the two sexes. Boys are expected to be more unruly—and they are.

Age, too, makes a difference in the frequency of such outbursts. But mothers may take heart—the peak is reached at two years. The average duration of outbursts changes very little throughout the whole first eight years—by far the greater majority of them being all over in less than five minutes, although that five minutes may seem like hours to the unwilling audience. But as the child grows older, the violent part of the "scene" is usually reduced, kicks and screams gradually being replaced by sulking, whining, or brooding over the incident.

What is the fuse that sets off the dynamite of the child's angry emotions? Dr. Goodenough found out just what we all know, that it is the failure of the

child to have his way in one situation or another. But she also found out many interesting and rather surprising points about what these situations most commonly are.

The "eat your spinach" command, for example, is relatively quite unimportant, despite popular opinion. With children under one year of age there was considerable objection to specific kinds of food, but for all ages this cause accounts for only 3.7 per cent. of outbursts. It is also interesting, in view of the modern mother's complaint that her child will not eat, that desire to eat between meals caused quite as many outbursts as did objection to coming to meals.

The most frequent cause of tantrums seems to be a matter of social relationship. It is, after all, quite a problem for the young human to adjust himself to all the complex artificialities of even juvenile society. Quarrels with playmates account for 11.9 per cent. of all the temper fits recorded. Unwillingness to share possessions and desire for someone else's accounts for another 2.9 and 3.8 per cent.

Just as important as the desire for someone else's things is the desire to share in someone else's activities. Little children of 3 years, especially, wish to be included in the play of older children who consider the small sister or brother in the way. And all youngsters have a strong desire to help adults and to be included in the conversation, play, or work of their elders.

### Provoked Because Not Understood

The little ones become provoked, too, when they cannot make their needs understood. And a desire for attention is also a factor, especially with the infants under one year.

Aside from these causes which Dr. Goodenough groups as problems of social relationship, two other classifications contain the great majority of the immediate causes of anger. These are closely related—direct conflict with authority, and objection on the part of the child to the establishment of routine habits, such as dressing, combing hair, going to bed, and coming to meals.

With the older children, an important cause of anger was a laudable desire to help themselves. They would become



#### SOCIAL DIFFICULTIES

—are a principal cause of anger at all ages. Nearly half the outbursts of children between three and four were caused by such maladjustments, principally disagreements with playmates. In the picture Jackie Cooper and Andy Shuford are having "reel" trouble.

enraged when they tried to accomplish some task or stunt and found themselves unable to do it, or when some well-intentioned adult would force upon them undesired assistance.

So much for the immediate causes of anger. But there are other causes that make one child subject to tantrums while another is placid, and that make some days a continual turmoil in even the best-regulated families.

The hour of the day has a great deal to do with the likelihood of outbursts of anger. The greatest number occurred at 11:30 in the morning and 5:30 in the afternoon, times when both hunger and fatigue are getting in their work. And there was a sharp increase observed after 7:30 in the evening. The smallest number occurred from 1:30 p. m. to 3:30, a time which may coincide with the time of the mid-day nap, perhaps showing that all children behave best when they are asleep.

Dr. Goodenough suggests that a light lunch in the middle of the morning and again in the middle or latter part of the afternoon might be of material assistance in reducing irritability, at least in certain cases.

"The greater number of parents in

this group appear to have been rather meticulous in enforcing the rule against eating between meals," she points out.

The health of the child has, of course, a great effect on his tendency to temper. Outbursts occur much more often when the child has a cold or when he is constipated. More outbursts are reported on days following restless nights or nights of bed-wetting. Children who have had previous illnesses are more prone to tempers, although this may be a matter of "spoiling" during the sickness as well as the effect on the physical condition.

Dr. Goodenough made another discovery about tantrums that would greatly astonish and disconcert the family council assembled to discuss Tommy's troubles. The outbursts increase proportionately with the number of adults in the household. The evidence is embarrassing, but clear. One way of helping Tommy is for everyone but Father and Mother to clear out and leave him alone. Visitors in the home also increase the likelihood of tempers, but when the child is taken out to visit or on some exciting excursion the effect is beneficial.

In advising parents what to do to cure or prevent temper exhibitions, Dr. Goodenough has no dogmatic rules. Apparently, the more you study what should be done, the less positive you become about any particular method.

#### "No One Method"

"No one method can be universally applicable to all children under all conditions; under certain circumstances methods that in general are not to be recommended may be the best possible ones to use," she says.

"As yet we know too little about the springs of human action to render control by rule of thumb either desirable or possible."

Here are some of the things other parents have done:

Methods change with the age and sex of the child. As age advances, the use of physical force, coaxing, diverting the child's attention, and of ignoring the outburst tends to decrease in frequency, and the use of scolding, threatening, and isolation (sending to his room) increases.

Boys are more often bribed, spanked, threatened, and isolated than are girls. Girls are more often treated with the ignoring attitude.

Here are the most effective methods used to bring any single tantrum to a

conclusion: bribery, granting the child's desire, removing the source of trouble, diverting the child's attention, providing a substitute activity, ignoring the outburst, and isolation. If you coax, sooth, reason, or scold, you will usually have to resort to some other method in addition before the storm is over.

#### Prevention Best

But the immediate effectiveness of a method does not always correspond to its value in training for self-control on similar occasions, Dr. Goodenough points out. Some of these methods are used more often by those parents whose children have frequent outbursts than they are by those whose youngsters are better-behaved in general. These are: granting the child's desire, removing the source of trouble (which Dr. Goodenough remarks seems to be much the same as granting the child's desire), coaxing, and soothing.

Parents of children having few outbursts find the following methods more effective: diverting the child's attention, reasoning, ignoring the outburst, isolation, and scolding.

Threatening is more often resorted to by the first group of parents, and spanking by the second, but the latter difference is small.

The method of giving in to the child or yielding the issue was used much more frequently by those parents having the greater number of outbursts to treat. The difference between this method and that of diverting the child's attention is that the latter was done as soon as the source of trouble arose, the former after a more or less lengthy "scene."

The old adage of an ounce of prevention being worth a pound of cure, applies particularly in the case of childish tempers, Dr. Goodenough has found. A little ingenuity applied before the outburst to head it off will often save the more wearing conflict of wills. It is also better for the child, for it isn't good for his self-esteem to enter into battle and be subdued and it isn't good for discipline for him to find that by grim persistence and sufficiently objectionable conduct he can worst his elders.

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