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## From The One-Minute Temper Tantrum Solution, by Ronald Mah

### FOLK & “EXPERT” REMEDIES FOR TANTRUMS

Ahhhhh! (stomp... stomp... stomp on the floor). Ahhhhh! (flop... flop... flop on the floor).

Ahhhhh! (bang... bang... bang fists on the floor).

*And the adult does what?*

There are many common remedies or folk remedies that are recommended by elders, religious leaders, politicians, and self-appointed experts as well as professionals who study teaching and parenting processes and child discipline and behavior. You see them all over the Internet and on television too. You get suggestions from people who should never be around children! Solutions that would get you arrested for animal abuse if you tried them with a dog. Tried and true methods that encourage you to revert to medieval times but only with a newer version of the rack! And many suggestions that encourage ignoring child abuse laws, because “a good whup’n din’ do me no harm, so it’s good ‘nough for my kids too.” Yup, perpetuating the cycle of family violence sounds peach keen, ya’ll! There are articles and books. Some are by parents with insight from their challenging children. Some are by parents with out of control children or spouses, but know what they should have done. Perhaps, I should have gotten suggestions from the young couple who had their 2 year old turn their dinner out into an unplanned six course meal, as lovey alternately screaming, pouting, hitting, AND gazing contentedly around the room. No, they didn’t have six courses. Just one plate of food that each sat and ate furtively between taking turns walking the kid out of the dining area about twelve times. Odds are they are following someone’s tantrum advice. Some advice is by professionals. Some by professionals who actually work with children! Others are by individuals with dogmatic agendas with remedies based on how children should behave, while ignoring whether or not children actually can behave as mandated. And forget developmentally appropriate practice! Their dogma prescribes “effective” discipline, without considering the emotional or psychological damage endured. Each remedy is based on some underlying assumption or theory regarding the motivations behind the tantrum. If assumptions are correct, resultant strategies or interventions may be effective. However, if assumptions are incorrect, resultant strategies or interventions may be ineffective, if not also, harmful. Common remedies and the underlying assumptions in each include:

**INDULGE** the child. One premise is that children are focused solely on acquiring something, and that children need to be satisfied or they will be emotionally damaged by disappointment. Disappointment? Wait until they learn how un-special they are... to the other kids. Resiliency cannot be learned without experiencing disappointment. Children are not that fragile, unless adults teach them to be. That is why it is called “learned helplessness.” The other premise for indulging children with they want is that it is the only way to get them to stop tantruming. “(A) major way that people deal with temper tantrums... is to give the children whatever they had the temper tantrums to get. Basically, this teaches kids that if they cry hard enough, or act out sufficiently, they will get whatever they want. (Greene, 1996). This is most likely to happen if adults cannot tolerate either the suffering of a child, or cannot suffer the whining, screaming, or conflict with a child. Indulgence develops the sixth sense in addition to the five senses of sight, smell, hearing, taste, and touch, the sense of entitlement! Children, and eventually as adults develop the expectation that they will be indulged; and may become outraged and vindictive if



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not. Indulging a child who throws a tantrum reinforces inappropriate techniques for power and control. Such self-centered orientation does not serve a community process of needs and collaboration.

**NURTURE** the child. The premise is that the child is seeking emotional support, and that nurturing would satisfy that need and thus, the tantrum would stop. Children should always be nurtured. They often need adults to provide nurturing so they can eventually learn how to self-nurture. It is also important that they learn how to self-nurture. However, not all tantrums are seeking nurturing or emotional support. So-called adult support becomes counterproductive, if the child is actually seeking greater power and control inappropriately. Or, nurturing inadvertently reinforces helplessness in a different tantrum. This creates a sense of victimhood and doom for the child. Adults, who have unresolved distress from not being nurtured when younger, may nurture compulsively whether a child needs it or not.

**SHAME** the child. The premise is that the child being egocentric and selfishly ignoring the needs of other people; and that to avoid horrible shame, the child will stop tantruming. Shaming a child may stop the behavior, but is dangerous to the self-esteem of the child. Shaming labels a child's needs as inappropriate and selfish. It puts a child's needs as being less important than some other need, such as the teacher's or parent's needs. Sometimes, if the child's needs may be emotional, social, or psychological, when an adult's needs may be of convenience or from frustration, shaming the child can be devastating. Shaming is a moral condemnation that continues a cycle of shaming from one generation into the next.

**PUNISH** (or threaten or intimidate) the child (sometimes expressed as "not letting them get away with it"). The premise is that the child's desire to avoid punishment is stronger than any need he/she may be expressing through the tantrum. This is a very dangerous assumption. If a tantrum is an expression of the internal emotional process of a child, punishing these natural motivations deny the child's basic human energy. Sometimes, these energies are so important and powerful, that they supersede the desire to avoid punishment. This can create a child who continues the "misbehavior" despite being punished, and who becomes immune to punishment. This is discussed at length in my book, "Difficult Behavior in Early Childhood," page 69-71. Punishment also assumes that it normally effective and appropriate. It may be presented in conjunction with rewards with thoughtful nuances regarding specificity. "Rewarding children for good behavior teaches them more than does punishing them for bad behavior. But sometimes the child's behavior requires correction and just a frown hasn't been enough. Some more impressive kind of punishment is needed," (Granger, 1995, p.28). Punishment may be effective in stopping a tantrum, but not address the underlying issue that prompted it in the first place.

**IGNORE** the child (one of the most common recommendations, and closely related to punishment). The premise is the child is seeking attention inappropriately, and giving the attention reinforces the tantrum; and without attention/reinforcement the tantrum will extinguish itself. Unfortunately, an ignored child may become more distraught, despairing, and may intensify to the point of harming self, others, or the environment. Dr. Bill Sears, pediatrician is something of an exception when he says, "In general, don't ignore a frustration tantrum. Turning away from her behavioral problems deprives her of a valuable support resource, while you lose the chance to improve your rapport with your tantrumer. (Sears, 2006). More experts, however



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seem to recommend ignoring a tantruming child, including a child who tantrums to get attention. For example, in answering the question, “What’s the best way to handle a tantrum?” Jay L. Hoecker, M.D. of the Mayo Clinic states,

“Children have tantrums because they want your attention. It doesn't matter if the attention is positive or negative... So if you lose your cool and yell, or have a tantrum yourself, you've given them what they want. If you can, it's best to pretend to ignore a tantrum. At home, you can act as if it's not interrupting things. After they quiet down, you may be able to negotiate with them, saying, ‘I noticed your behavior, but that won't get my attention.’” (Hoecker, 2006).

Many experts present attention seeking as inherently inappropriate if done through a tantrum. Thus, they recommend ignoring, threatening, or punishing the approach. Although, the presentation of a request as a tantrum may need adjustment, the request itself for attention still needs to be honored. Children do not just want adult’s attention without an underlying urgency. Getting adult’s attention serves to get what they need, whether it is an emotional need such as validation or nurturing, a physical need or desire (toy or candy), or some other childhood urgency. Many times, children do not necessarily want an adult’s attention, but rather the adult’s emotional or physical availability due to some anxiety. Readily accessible adult availability is what allows a child to virtually ignore you right up until the telephone rings. Once you have answered the phone and you become unavailable, availability anxiety ignites. Arbitrary demands, urgencies, and crises suddenly demand your attention- in actuality, the child demands your availability. Hoecker intensifies the anxiety with the additional suggestion to say, “‘You're in timeout and, as far as I'm concerned, you're invisible to me.’ You pretend that you don't even see the child, but you can still assure his or her safety. Up until the age of 5, magic is real to children. So if you say they're invisible to you, they'll believe it.” This recommendation could well stop a tantrum immediately. However, rather than responding to a possible call for help, it threatens a complete emotional annihilation of the child.

**DISTRACT** the child. Distraction (another very common recommendation) purposely draws or directs the child’s attention away from whatever is motivating the tantrum to some other thing or issue. It is ironic that distraction is presented as a discipline or guidance method. The term “discipline” comes from the root word of “disciple.” Discipline is training to lead a healthy life. Children are disciplined in order for them to learn productive beliefs, values, and behaviors as individuals and members in relationships and of communities. Distraction is not discipline! If it teaches anything to the child at all, it teaches that adults disrespect and wish to ignore the child’s urgency or need. “I want the ball!” is responded with, “Play with the doll... here’s something to eat... (what you want isn’t important to me!).” Under the guise of discipline, and highly recommended by numerous experts,

“...many parents found an easy way out – distraction... it’s so much easier not to discipline at all. Distraction was the alternative, at least for little kids. If a kid won’t eat his green beans, and we don’t have the time to encourage, wheedle, whine or demand... we put Cool Whip topping on them. Distraction makes the distasteful aspects of growing up more palatable, it seems, and takes the edge off of difficulty... Providing there is something available with which to distract... children can be deflected from going after what they really want by accepting whatever it is we give...” (Kropp, 2001, page 74)



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Many experts add a seemingly innocuous additional caveat to their recommendation to use distraction. “Distraction involves changing the child’s focus from an activity that is unacceptable to one that is acceptable without directly confronting the inappropriate behavior. Distraction works very well with children under the age of three.” (Albrecht & Miller, 2001, p.44). Others estimate that the distraction “works” with tantrums up until about 3 or 4. After that, I guess you’re out of luck! And, children are out of luck too. Distraction may stop or derail the tantrum, but does nothing to address the underlying issues of the tantrum. No learning or experience with managing disappointment, other feelings or needs, no skills development in problem solving, no balancing self-care with seeking help, no practice articulating needs to others... no discipline about living life well. Distraction after 3 or 4 years does not work anymore, because since children’s needs and urgencies are lifelong human challenges, they eventually become too smart to be distracted. As I tell my child clients, “You can fool me. You can fool me or your parents or teacher for a long time. But you won’t fool me forever. And the longer it takes for me to figure out that you’ve been fooling me or lying to me, the more furious I’m going to be when I find out!” Distraction may not be the best intervention even at young ages. Susan G. O’Leary states from her research that,

“We have also learned that mothers are less effective when they try to distract their misbehaving children than when they use clear reprimands. In fact, when distraction does not work and mothers change their tactics to reprimanding, children become upset, as though they are offended by the change. On the other hand, children are not particularly upset when they are consistently and prudently reprimanded. Distraction may be less effective than reprimanding because distraction provides positive attention to misbehavior. (O’Leary, 1995, p12).

When a child throws a tantrum, distracting them to something else desirable is rewarding them for tantruming! Distraction, rather than being discipline for more positive living becomes encouragement to throw tantrums. The tantrum may not get them what they wanted originally, but it still gets them something else they discover they want. If you’re digging for diamonds and end up with gold, you’ll keep digging that your shovel in and throwing dirt over your shoulders! Children responded to with distraction will keep digging their heels in and throwing those tantrums. In addition, O’Leary with Reid and Wolff state,

“Mothers who initially responded to transgressions with reprimands were later able to use distraction without adverse effects. Conversely, mothers who attempted to manage behavior with distraction first were less effective, and their children transgressed to a great deal. When these mothers did implement the more effective strategy of reprimanding transgressions, their children cried and whined at high rates, behaviors likely to punish their mother’s use of better discipline. (Reid, O’Leary, & Wolff, Vol. 22, No. 2, 1994).

In other words, when children were reprimanded after prior distraction attempts (their parents either successfully fooling them or trying to fool them), they became furious for having been fooled! The punishing behavior they described is the intensification of the tantruming behavior. Sometimes, a child or teenager won’t get what they want. It may be very disappointing and extremely upsetting. Falling back on the distraction tactic ignores the child or teenager’s disappointment and upset. You don’t always get your way. Reality isn’t fun. Honor the



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disappointment and upset, and hold the line. Be the adult. Responsibility isn't fun either! Distracting children from tantrums or other upset may be adults' attempts to avoid responsibility to make difficult discipline choices and engage in difficult processes.

There can be negative consequences even as some approaches succeed in stopping the tantrum. Understanding temper tantrums may have differing underlying causes will help adults use positive discipline as alternatives to always using punishment. Better communication, meeting children's needs, and breaking negative patterns and cycles of frustration, anger, negative behavior, and violence result, rather than merely controlling behavior. Parents and other adults often become extremely frustrated, get angry, and feel ineffective when dealing with a child temper tantrum. The potential for tantrums and even, abuse by the adult becomes greater the more ineffective over time the adult feels.

### **MULTI-ISSUE THEORY OF TANTRUMS**

While the orderly approach for understanding behavior discussed in earlier chapters is useful with tantrum prevention, when a tantrum is full blown, then discerning types of tantrums is necessary. Many experts name only two types of tantrums: frustration tantrums and demanding tantrums. Schmitt names five types of tantrum with recommendations for responses to each.

1. Support and help children having frustration- or fatigue-related tantrums.
2. Ignore attention-seeking or demanding-type tantrums.
3. Physically move children having refusal-type or avoidance-type tantrums.
4. Use time-outs for disruptive-type tantrums.
5. Hold children having harmful or rage-type tantrums. (Schmitt, 2006).

Schmitt's five types mix different underlying issues and different expressions. Fatigue can cause frustration, but frustration can come from other issues as well. In addition, frustration, fatigue-related tantrums, demanding-type tantrums, refusal-type or avoidance-type tantrums, which imply underlying issues can all be expressed differently. All of them can become disruptive-type tantrums or harmful or rage-type tantrums, or be subtly expressed: sulking, the silent treatment, or passive-aggressive behavior. Or, be expressed with self-destructive behavior, especially as individuals get older such as gambling, unhealthy relationships, over-eating, alcohol, or drugs. Focusing on how tantrums are expressed may not be beneficial since there is an infinite variety of ways tantrums are expressed.

Conceptualizing temper tantrums as having four basic underlying issues is helpful. In this book, the four different types of tantrums refer to their four different underlying issues, rather than how they are expressed. Each of the four types of tantrums may be expressed in many different ways. For most tantrums, one of four possibilities is the primary issue in the tantrum. While there are elements of all four issues in most tantrums, tantrum resolution interventions should be directed at the dominant underlying issue. Each type of tantrum directs a logical intervention response that will be the most effective and efficient in resolving the tantrum. The following is a summary of the tantrum types, the primary underlying issues, and the intervention responses.

<b>TYPE OF TANTRUM</b>	<b>PRIMARY ISSUE</b>	<b>RESPONSE</b>
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<b>Manipulative tantrums</b>	<b>Power &amp; control</b>	<b>set boundaries/limits</b>
<b>Upset tantrums</b>	<b>distress</b>	<b>validation/nurturing</b>
<b>Helpless tantrums</b>	<b>despair</b>	<b>empowerment</b>
<b>Cathartic tantrums</b>	<b>built up stress</b>	<b>permission &amp; guidance to release</b>

Correctly recognizing the type of tantrum implies recognizing the primary underlying issue. There is no single magic wand for tantrums, but there are four underlying issues to identify, that become the four keys to activating the appropriate intervention. Time to begin unlocking the one-minute temper tantrum solution!

### **Biography**

Ronald Mah, therapist and educator, combines concepts, principles, and philosophy with practical techniques and guidelines for effective and productive results. He uses humor and stories from his many experiences to illustrate important points in a stimulating and highly motivating and engaging style.

A Licensed Marriage & Family Therapist, his experiences include: Asian-American community mental health, Severely Emotionally Disturbed mental health & school partnership programs, vocational programs for at risk youth, welfare to work programs, clinical consulting & cross and multi-cultural training for Head Start, other early childhood education programs, social services organizations, & mental health agencies, supervising a high school mental health clinic, training and supervising therapists, private practice in Castro Valley, author of the Asian Pacific Islander Parent Education Support curriculum.

Professional Education experiences include: 16 years in ECE, including owning and running a child development center for 11 years, Kindergarten, elementary, & secondary teaching credentials and experience, ethnic studies curriculum writer, community college instructor, Masters of Psychology instructor, and former member Board of Directors of the California Kindergarten Association and of the California Association of Marriage & Family Therapists.