Tears No More

by Mary-Ann Schuler

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

COPYRIGHT AND TRADEMARK NOTICES 1

LIMITS OF LIABILITY & DISCLAIMERS OF WARRANTY 1

AFFILIATE COMPENSATION DISCLOSURE 2

INTRODUCTION 5

WHY ARE CHILDREN IRRITABLE 7

WHAT MAKES YOUR CHILD IRRITABLE 10

HOW DOES A CHILD BECOME CALM 13

GUIDELINES TO MAKE YOUR CHILD BECOME A HAPPIER CHILD 19

REFERENCES & RESOURCES 25

INTRODUCTION

One of the most disturbing psychological challenges of parenthood is a child who is chronically irritable, angry, and who explodes into temper tantrums.

In fact, anger and irritability are among the most common reason parents consult health professionals.

Irritability can have a damaging effect on the child's development, the parent-child relationship, and family life.

What's worse, parents become desperate in their attempts to calm their child.

And when nothing works, parents often feel useless and worry why their child appears unhappy most of the time. For the child, it is an unsettling experience

to be chronically unregulated when things like transitions to a new activity, getting dressed, or being bathed trigger a tantrum.

Usually such children learn to depend on their parents to soothe them because they lack strategies for self-calming.

And because they are irritable most of the time, they may not experience pleasurable interactions with others.

There are many reasons a child is irritable or has problems regulating his or her mood. It is helpful for parents to understand what might be setting off the irritability, as well as learn ways to help their child learn to stay calm when frustrated or distressed.

This short guide will help you achieve exactly that by showing you an easy-to-read, easy-to-follow method to help calm your baby in a family-oriented mix of guidance, support, and efficient techniques.

There are several reasons why children are irritable.

Sometimes there are medical problems like chronic ear infections, severe allergies, or urinary tract infections that may make your child uncomfortable and experience pain.

A common problem frequently overlooked is intolerance to milk. Children who rely on a diet heavy in gluten (wheat products) or sugar products can experience frequent mood swings and become picky eaters.

Some children are born fussy and have a difficult temperament. Children with a difficult temperament are usually more intense, have a hard time tolerating change, and distress easily.

It may be hard for them to keep a happy mood for very long. In addition, these children tend to be less flexible when changes of any sort are introduced.

As a result, they often get angry, whishing that things be done exactly how they want them to be.

Perhaps the most common reason children are irritable is because they become easily overstimulated in response to sensory stimulation.

Basic experiences like face washing, dressing, noise on the playground, or a busy household can load their nervous system and create an internal state that can be overwhelming to the child and which can ultimately lead to meltdowns.

An inflexible child is often an irritable child.

Children who have problems with organization and planning often fall apart when they are required to come up with a new way of doing things.

In addition to getting overstimulated easily, these irritable children often get angry when they have to organize themselves to perform a complex task.

This problem is commonly associated with attention deficit disorder, executive functioning problems, as well as motor planning issues.

Finally, it is important to determine whether your child has a mood regulation problem that makes it difficult for him to keep a content mood.

Many parents worry about what this could mean for their child as he grows older. The truth is, it's very difficult to diagnose a mood disorder in very young children, but irritability is a factor in disorders such as anxiety or depression. As your child grows older, you may notice other things that point out to the

fact that there is an underlying mood problem that goes beyond a fussy, irritable temperament.

When the mood problems are unresponsive to typical solutions presented in this guide, a consultation with a developmental or behavioral pediatrician or a child psychologist is important.

However, an important aspect for parents to keep in mind is that what the child needs most is to learn how to self-calm on his or her own and to tolerate distress and frustration. This is a major focus of the strategy in this guide.

It is important not to overlook the impact that the parents' moods have on a child – it is not unusual for children with mood problems to have parents who also struggle with their mood.

There is also the genetic component. You may have a grandparent who had been diagnosed with anxiety, an uncle with depression, or you yourself struggled with a mood disorder your entire life.

If this is the case, it becomes even more important to consult with a mental health professional to understand if your child may have a mood disorder that makes him or her irritable.

When children are exposed to a parent who is angry, irritable, or depressed most of the time, they learn to respond to these strong emotions.

So even if your child doesn't have a mood disorder, he can learn that this is how one behaves.

The important thing is for you as a parent is to take care of yourself and find ways to self-calm and be available anytime for the difficult task of parenting.

Common Irritability Causes

Can't fall and stay asleep	Overstimulated by sensory stimulation	Distresses easily	Allergies, medical problems	Reflux, eating problems
Poor organization skills	Overwhelmed by limits and change	Inflexibility and inability to adapt	Home life disorganized	Parent(s) angry or depressed

Sometimes, parents find that they are constantly walking on eggshells around their irritable child. They may be afraid to set a limit or impose a change of activity because they know their child is likely to explode into a long tantrum.

Some parents structure every minute of the child's day to keep them organized. But this technique can be double-edged.

By overstimulating the child or giving him one activity after the next in order to distract him can backfire, and cause the child to become flooded with too much stimulation, ultimately leading to an never-ending cycle of tantrums.

In scientific studies of irritable children with regulatory problems, experts found that irritable children express themselves through distress signals.

They may scream, kick, push, bite, and yell to let you know how they feel.

There may be very little calm discussion about things, or happy activity that fills their time. This state of chaos and intensity causes the parent-child interaction to become disrupted and thus everything becomes negative.

Sometimes, parents withdraw or disengage to avoid negative interactions with their child. Moreover, they may let their child play alone when they are happy and miss the best time to interact with them.

HOW DOES A CHILD BECOME CALM

Every child has to learn how to handle his or her own distress.

Initially the parents calm the child.

As they read their child's cues and see what works, they come up with a set of soothing strategies that work for their child.

The child begins to mentally process these strategies and gradually takes over the task of self-calming.

The process of becoming a well-regulated person depends on certain skills.

The child also needs models in the environment for how to become a good self-calmer.

Here are some methods that help a child become well-regulated:

→ When babies cry, it helps them to have a responsive, caring, and sensitive parent who helps them calm down. This gives the child the message that their basic needs can be met and there are ways to handle distress. This step requires that parent(s) know how to read their child's signals and gestures, as well as have a host of calming strategies at their fingertips.

→ As a child matures, he learns to internalize strategies to self-calm. Consistent use of good calming strategies helps the child lean which ones to call upon in different situations. The child also observes others solve similar problems and learns when and where to use which strategies.

Calming strategies and environmental modifications are most useful when one anticipates what could go wrong and have things in place for that moment when the child needs them.

This leads to the importance of teaching the child to understand the precursors of irritability, to anticipate the onset of frustration and distress, and to use appropriate strategies that are available.

Self-calming depends on the ability to problem solve before, during, and after a distressing episode.

The child gradually learns a variety of ways to help himself organize and monitor his own actions and to tolerate various negative emotions.

To help your child become a thinking child, it is useful to help him or her step out of the negative emotions and be thoughtful about the sequence of events that occurred. Many parents say things like “I’ve told him a thousand times that when he falls apart, he needs to go to his bedroom and calm down, but he never listens. If I pick him up and put him there, he screams even more”.

The problem is that once the child reaches a distressed state, he may completely shut off his thinking brain and cannot follow the strategy that his parents are trying to teach him.

This is why it’s important to break the strategy down into steps so that the child learns a successful approximation of what may work.

For instance, instead of expecting the child to go directly to the bedroom, the parent may guide the child to go to a corner of the room and hug his body tightly while humming a calm-down song.

The idea behind this is to teach your child how to stop and think in the moment, then slowly move towards anticipating what could go wrong, remembering the strategy, and using it.

It isn't until children have the capacity to remember past events and reflect on what has happened that they are able to internalize and use strategies that might work.

This is when the child develops insight into his behavior.

Self-calming requires the child to decrease the state of arousal he experiences related to distress.

An adaptable child learns to recognize the internal state of distress and hyperarousal, then finds ways to inhibit the arousal through strategies such as closing his eyes.

A toddler may hold his hands together or put them in his pockets when told not to touch a fragile object, thus inhibiting himself in an adaptable way.

An adult struggling to master a very difficult task may take a break to refresh himself mentally and physically, thus avoiding an adult-sized tantrum.

Self-regulation develops through synchronized, reciprocal, and well-modulated interactions between parents and their children.

A task of the young infant is to be able to tolerate the intensity of arousal they feel while interacting with their mom or dad. An infant who is flooded with too much arousal during interactions will avoid them and shut down.

For a child to experience pleasure from playing or interacting with his parent(s), he needs to find ways to avoid becoming over-stimulated.

The child has to find an optimal level of internal arousal to remain engaged in the interaction.

Consequently, the parent acts to help regulate the child's arousal by timing her responses, laughing at the right moment, touching her child periodically, encouraging him, and other behaviors that engage the child.

If you're too active, though, and doing more than what your child can process, the child will respond by backing away or becoming distressed.

Research has shown that when the parent and child are out-of-sync, the child learns to withdraw from the overly arousing interaction.

This can lead to disengagement, with resulting insecurity in attachments.

So how do you find the most optimal level of stimulation when you interact with your child?

The first thing you need to keep in mind is that the optimal level varies greatly from one child to the next and depends upon the child's threshold for arousal, tolerance for stimulation, and ability to self-control arousal.

The best way to know if you're on the right track is to watch your child's response. If you are offering an optimal level of stimulation, smiling occurs.

An increase in your child's attentiveness will usually relate to you becoming less active and more attentive to what your child is doing. Pay attention to what your child is seeking and needing from you. If you are too active and directive of your child, he is likely to become less focused and attentive.

Here are the skills needed for your child to become an effective self-calmer:

- → Provide a model of what it looks and feels like to be calm.
- → Validate your child's level of distress. Respond to him gently through gestures and words.
- → Show your child how to calm down in many different situations.
- → Expand your child's repertoire of self-calming strategies so that when one fails, another one might work.
- → Help your child find activities that give him pleasure so that he can shift from a distressed feeling to a positive one.
- → Once your child is calm, help him think through what caused his distress and what he can do to make himself feel better next time it happens.
- → While he is distressed, help your child to decrease that feeling. Use calming strategies that involve his cognitive abilities.
- → Help your child think of what the next step might be and remain focused on accomplishing that goal.

Before embarking on a program to address your child's irritability, it is useful to think about when and where crying and irritability occur, and for how long, to determine the causes of the behavior.

In some cases, a crying infant or irritable child may be responding to tensions that you are feeling which may cause you to handle your child briskly or to snap at them when they ask for something.

All parents have bad days, but if this is a normal course of events for you, then what is irritability may occur whenever changes are introduced in the everyday routine or activity.

Once it is more apparent what might be underlying the child's irritability, treatment ideas can be tried.

It is very hard to help intensely unregulated children to calm down.

Sometimes parents say that once the tantrum begins, it has to run its course and may take several hours before things get better.

An important aspect in helping your child is to develop a consistent plan in approaching different behaviors.

The key principle to keep in mind is that we need to teach your child to calm himself down, to become a better problem solver, and to tolerate distress when he can't change a frustrating situation.

As parents we need to keep calm, understand our own limits, and make a plan that will work. At the same time, it is essential for you to understand your child's distress and feelings while learning how to set limits and redirect your child to purposeful activity.

Below are listed a number of guidelines that can be used in helping your child become a happier child:

→ Rule Out Medical Problems

When an infant or child is inconsolable, it is important to determine if the child has any medical problem that may be the primary reason for the crying or chronic irritability.

→ Address Irritability-Generating Sensory Hypersensitivities

Inconsolability may be related to hypersensitivities that the child has to environmental stimulation. These hypersensitivities may include clothes that agitates the child, noises that overstimulate him, or too many activities in a room that create an overloading effect.

The child's sensory hypersensitivities should be addressed whenever possible through play. If your child is hypersensitive to sounds, he should be encouraged to engage in activities that allow him to make sounds.

In addition, movement activities are very calming, particularly ones that provide linear movement like glider chairs and trampolines.

→ Avoid Overstimulating Your Child

A common problem confronting the parent who is trying to console a crying child is a tendency to become frantic when their efforts do not seem to work.

You may find yourself rocking your child in a forward and back motion for a few minutes, then swinging your child in the air when the crying resumes.

Or if your child is older, you may hand him a book to look at, music to listen to, or convince him to go outside for a change of scenery.

When each of your ideas fail to work, you find yourself scanning the list in your mind to offer something else that might work.

Whatever you do, it's a good idea to step back and think how many things did you just do to help your child calm down? If you count more than three, and all in a short period of time, it probably is too many.

The important thing is to try one thing long enough to see if it works.

One trick is to watch to see if there are certain situations or demands that consistently overwhelm your child.

For example, some children are overwhelmed by noisy, crowded environments. In this case, the issue is more sensory based.

This kind of child needs to have smaller amounts of stimulation in his life.

In this regard, it is helpful to teach your child to find healthy escapes when he is overwhelmed.

Other children cannot stand to have limits place on them because of their inflexibility in tolerating change or their need to control what happens to them.

Once you figure out what might be contributing to the irritability, you might be able to help your child by prompting him when a limit is on the horizon.

An easy way to do this is to use a behavioral chart with clear pictures or symbols of upcoming events or tasks that need to be done.

It is very comforting for children to know what's next on the agenda.

→ Help The Child Become More Self-Reliant

Many parents complain that their child is constantly whining and demanding their attention.

To help build the child's capacity to organize himself and decrease reliance on the parent to entertain him, you should try playing with your child for about 10 to 15 minutes using the child's favorite toys.

After the child is playing well, you should encourage him to keep playing while you do a small chore or activity in the same room.

Every few minutes, you should check in, reassure, and praise him.

Whenever you are in involved in a task such as cooking a meal, it is wise to offer your young child some pots and pans, plastic containers, and small objects to use in filling, dumping, stirring, etc. so that your child can play and imitate you while you cook. If your child complains, you should try to redirect him physically or verbally. Moreover, you should be clear to your child about

when it is time that you will pick them up or help them and when it isn't because you are busy.

As soon as you are finished with your chore, you should reward them for playing alone or waiting by sitting with them to read a story or playing with them briefly.

For young babies, they may be carried about in a sling while you do household chores so that he or she can see what you are doing.

With older children – preschoolers and school-aged children – it is helpful to teach your child to label his or her emotions and to read bodily signals so that he or she can implement calm-down strategies on their own.

Sometimes children respond to ideas like a traffic light or mood meter with red color denoting "time to put on the brakes" or mad or angry feelings and green or blue colors for feeling calm or focused.

Other children respond well to thinking about their engine is running.

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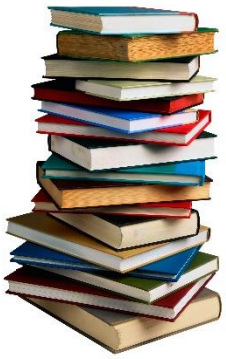

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