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## **The A, B, C's (Adult, Baby, Child) of Temper Tantrums w/ the "One-Minute Temper Tantrum Solution"**

*I can hear the screaming and crying from my office. It has been going on for five minutes. I can Mickey screaming, "It's my turn!!", and the teacher screaming back, "No, it's not! You can't run this group! You stop it!!" Here they come again! The teacher stomps into my office, with Mickey in tow. Angrily, she puts him on the couch, "He's got to learn he can't just have his way all the time! I don't have time to deal with his fighting me!!" She stomps off to rejoin her group of three year old kids which is now (of course) in chaos. Tears are streaming down Mickey's face; his face is red; his entire body shakes with the hiccups. I turn my chair toward him.....less than a minute later, he has calmed down, acknowledged what he needs to do to be with his group, and is going off to rejoin his group where he is able to cooperate again. Why? What happened?*

When someone throws a temper tantrum, be he/she an Adult, Baby, or Child, we often get sucked into a miserable and fruitless and escalating battle. Mickey was throwing a tantrum and the teacher got sucked into it. Even as we begin the battle with our child, we already know that it is going to be fruitless and escalating. While we are in the midst of it, we know it is fruitless and escalating. When we are finally at the end of it, we chide ourselves for having fallen for it again! And, it is not only with children but also with other adults that we get into STUPID arguments with. This is because the dynamics involved are fundamentally the same.

Sometimes, instead of arguing with a tantruming child, it is a client, spouse, colleague, or friend that we get into an infuriating argument with. In the midst of it, we realize that we are saying the same thing over and over again; and, that the other person just doesn't seem to get it- they are saying the same things over and over again as well. At some point, it becomes a matter of ego and pride; there seems to be no gracious way to end the argument without losing something precious- our self-esteem. Minutes, hours, or days later, we think what a stupid argument it all was. Yet, we were willing to scream and insult each other. We were ready to get physical, fight to the death, divorce, disown relatives, terminate years long friendships, or even risk our livelihood or employment.

And what for? What was so important to fight so vehemently and to risk so much? It could not have been just whether the garbage got taken out or not; or about getting an invitation to a stupid party or not; or a "mean" look; or about the other employee taking five minutes more or less lunch; or whether your sister took the better blouse or not. Although it may seem illogical, the facts of the situation are virtually irrelevant compared to the underlying issues of the tantrum or argument. These need to be uncovered and examined. What appears to the outside objective observer (such as your husband or wife, boss, or teacher) as a nonsensical argument or tantrum over trivial matters (garbage, clocking in, or turns) is to the participants, a desperate struggle to maintain their sense of worth, self-esteem, and rights. In a psychological and emotional sense, it is a life and death struggle.

To understand the intensity and extent of this battle, there must be a distinction made between manipulative tantrums and temperamental tantrums; between seeking control and self-survival. There is another aspect of tantruming which I call the HELPLESS TANTRUM. The helpless tantrum comes from a more profound level of psychodynamic issues including self-esteem damage, and deserves its own focus. Unfortunately, there is not enough space in this article to



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discuss it adequately. **MANIPULATIVE TANTRUMS** are done at some conscious or semi-conscious level by a child or adult to attempt to control the environment (including other people) toward achieving some perceived gain. A child throws him/herself on the floor, screaming at the grocery store. His/her mother or father becomes embarrassed at the child's behavior; he/she feels others seeing this behavior as a reflection of his/her parenting skills. The parent appeases the child by buying the expensive sugar coated, chocolate smeared, high salt, super hero cereal with the plastic super hero car inside. By manipulating his/her parent's insecurity as a parent and low self-esteem, the child is able to turn the environment around to his/her wishes; from "No, you can't have that cereal," to "Oh, alright! We'll get it already!"

Adults throw slightly more sophisticated manipulative tantrums: the silent treatment, sulking, or going on an eating, drinking, drug, or acting out binge. But, then again, maybe they are not any more sophisticated than the two year olds' tantrum! Other times, the adult seeks control for some benefit through other kinds of controlling or manipulative behavior: through money and other material things, through access personally (withdrawal of attention and/or affection), or through access to tools and toys (cars, cameras, etc.).

There is also the **CATHARTIC TANTRUM** which is about loaded stress that requires release of the pent up emotions. This requires only permission and perhaps, guidance as to how to release the stress constructively.

The **UPSET TANTRUM**, on the other hand, is often ignited through frustration in dealing with the environment (not getting the cereal), but is not manipulative per se. Instead, it is a distress reaction to the lack of control one feels one has in the environment. The internal psycho-emotional perception is that one's very survival is at stake. For example, a baby gets into distress when he/she is hungry, wet, scared, or tired. He/she is at the mercy of his/her caretaker's attentiveness, conscientiousness, efficiency, and nurturing skills. The baby doesn't know that he/she will get fed, cleaned up, is safe, or will feel better when he/she has rested. The baby does not know that he/she will be okay- that he/she will survive. Some babies will complain quietly and others will scream and kick with incredible intensity- and for a long time. There is a temperamental difference between such babies that is often innate; they were different from day one. This is an important related issue deserving of fuller examination in another article.

When a baby is in distress (having a tantrum) that has to do with fear, upset, or insecurity, all our instincts activate to care for him/her. We connect with the baby through four avenues. First, we **TOUCH** as we pick him/her up and cuddle him/her to our chest. Second, we take a positive **BODY POSTURE AND FACIAL EXPRESSION** as we lean over with a gentle caring expression. Third, we use a gentle and nurturing **TONE** of voice that reassures. These first three elements of contact and validation are the fundamentals to connecting to the baby, child, and adult in distress. The last element or avenue is the **MESSAGE** of concern and caring. For the baby, of course, the **MESSAGE** is irrelevant; he/she cannot understand! There is a wonderful scene in "Three Men and a Baby" when Tom Selleck is reading out loud a story of a violent heavyweight boxing match from a sports magazine to the baby Mary... but in a gentle tone. One of the other men comes by and says that he should not be reading such violent material to Mary. His reply was that it did not matter what the story was about since only the tone counted.

Often the message (advice, solution, perspectives, and so forth) or the facts do not matter. **TOUCH, BODY POSTURE AND FACIAL EXPRESSION**, and **TONE** connections (which take



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often less than a minute of time) are validating and comforting to the distressed person. Remember that distress is an emotional state more than anything else, and requires a response that connects emotionally. A MESSAGE of advice and facts is a cognitive-logical response. This is why otherwise wise and effective messages are not responded to by the person in distress. Trying to repeat the MESSAGE, no matter how sensible or relevant it may be, only serves to frustrate the person in need. He/she will respond to his/her frustration with a repeated demand for validation, and then with intensified anger when the need is still unmet. This the essence of the cycle of endlessly repeated "stupid" arguments that we are so familiar with. Once his/her emotional need is met, however, then and only then can he/she be able to hear and use such a message-acknowledge such an attempt at contact and validation. Done correctly, it can take less than a minute of actual time to help the person resolve their tantrum! I have successfully trained dozens of teachers and parents to do this.

Although we usually instinctively respond to the baby's distress with the four validating elements of TOUCH, BODY POSTURE AND FACIAL EXPRESSION, TONE, and MESSAGE, we often do not respond to an older child's or an adult's distress with validation. We may respond in anger or with rational solutions that miss the emotional needs. Why? Often it is because we do not recognize the tantrum or upset or emotional need state as a distress reaction. Instead, we see it as irrational, manipulative, and/or as an attack on ourselves. In addition, we may find the whole tantruming or upset or in need situation as aversive since it may evoke within us a frightening sense of powerlessness and frustration. Therefore, we may try to avoid it or shove it aside. Therefore, becoming more aware of how a person in need and/or an out of control situation triggers our psycho-emotional issues then becomes the first step to effectively, and in an healthy manner, help the baby, child, or adult in distress.

The foundation of healthy interaction to the tantrum- the person in distress is each person's own foundation of healthy self-awareness. The one-minute tantrum solution is based not on fixing the person, but on connecting with one's own psycho-emotional state in order to understand and recognize the other person's distress state. Then, one can use the TOUCH, BODY POSTURE AND FACIAL EXPRESSION, TONE, and then MESSAGE (later!) elements to connect with the distress. This gives the person a way and a caring figure to settle down with, ground his/her anxiety, and center him/herself emotionally. The person in distress can be said to be all over the place- in a sense, outside of him/herself. He/she uses the stable figure (parent, spouse, friend, or teacher offering connection) to gather him/herself and feel safe and secure again. The principles discussed here are the same principles involved in many if not all emotional need relationships between two people of any age.

Successful interaction becomes a matter of recognizing and applying these basic principles to the child or person and the situation. When done appropriately, it does not take much time; there can really be a temper tantrum solution- what I call a one-minute temper tantrum solution. So, what was it I did with Mickey?

*I turn my chair toward him.... I gesture for him to come to me. Sniffing and sad, Mickey comes to me and leans against my leg; I place my left arm around his shoulders gently and with my right hand I rub his chest and stomach (where tension is held)...TOUCH! I lean my head down towards his, keeping a gentle expression on my face...BODY POSTURE AND FACIAL EXPRESSION! In a gentle nurturing tone, I begin speaking to him...TONE! I say, "It must be sad for you to get into trouble with the teacher, isn't it? You feel bad*



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*don't you?" (I don't repeat rules or make judgments about the circumstances; I speak to his state of being- his feelings)...VALIDATING MESSAGE! Mickey's distress melts; his body relaxes; and he says, "Yeeesss!" in a sad but not angry or distressed voice. Mickey has been heard by someone- he has been validated. Now he feels safe again. NOW, I can tell him (and he can hear), "Mickey, you need to try to cooperate with the teacher. Okay? Can you go back and tell the teacher you want to try again?" Mickey nods his agreement and trots off back to his group. Less than one minute's elapsed time- the one-minute temper tantrum solution!*

\*Footnote: Despite many unfruitful attempts to train the teacher, she was unable to accept her role in the mutual temper tantruming, unable to work effectively with Mickey, and being desperate to protect her own self-esteem, she responded with the only solution left to her-she blamed Mickey as being a bad kid, endangering his self-esteem. This was, of course, unacceptable, and as a result, along with other issues, she was eventually terminated.

## **TANTRUMS or Other Extreme States of Being**

Type:	<b>MANIPULATIVE</b>	<b>UPSET</b>	<b>HELPLESS</b>	<b>CATHARTIC</b>
Underlying Issue:	<b>POWER &amp; CONTROL</b>	<b>DISTRESS</b>	<b>DESPAIR</b>	<b>RELEASE</b>
Response/ Intervention:	<b>SET LIMITS/ BOUNDARIES</b>	<b>VALIDATE/ NURTURE</b>	<b>EMPOWER</b>	<b>PERMISSION &amp; GUIDANCE</b>

### **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.