Temper tantrums tend to a) contain verbal and physically aggressive behaviors, b) be extreme responses not justified by the situation, c) involve at least one adult and one child, and d) are likely to occur in a public (or school) setting. Tantrums tend to be a learned response that results in desired outcomes for the child (McCurdy, Kunz, & Sheridan, 2006). As tantrums are intense and uncomfortable for students and adults alike, this brief will discuss some behavioral techniques designed to eliminate tantrums and increase appropriate behaviors while still responding to the student’s needs.

It is important to remember that tantrums occur within environmental conditions and therefore serve a function (a purpose) for the student. Events, demands, instructional tasks, etc., can increase the likelihood of a tantrum. Typically students engage in the behavior to obtain what they want or to escape something they don’t like or don’t want to do. The cycle of tantruming behavior can be difficult to break mainly because behavior intensity can increase due to an assumption, by the student, that the adult will eventually give in and give up. It may be helpful to conduct a Functional Behavior Assessment of tantrum behaviors to determine the antecedents (what happens immediately before the tantrum) and consequences (what happens immediately after display of tantrum, the reaction from the environment) maintaining the behavior.

### Antecedent Strategies

**Time-In:** An engaging and reinforcing environment that provides attention for appropriate behaviors decreases the need and motivation for students to seek adult attention by displaying inappropriate behavior or tantrums. For some students, it may be necessary to provide a “time in” opportunity for 15-20 seconds every 5 to 10 minutes. This can be achieved by engaging in an activity with the students, checking in with them while they work, allowing them to complete examples for the class, or taking a few moments to praise them for appropriate behavior.

**Differential Attention:** Find something that the student is doing appropriately and praise that behavior. Specific and labeled praise has been shown to increase positive behaviors. Remember that the praise must be specific and immediate, and is best given in close proximity to the student. This is also useful for the teacher who feels as if they are always redirecting a student and using frequent “don’t” reprimands.

**Functional Communication Training (FCT):** In some instances, students may engage in tantrum behaviors as a means of communicating with others. This can be especially true for those students with severe language, communication, or cognitive impairments. FCT helps students convey their needs or frustrations using socially appropriate alternatives to tantrums. This will teach students a new response, other than a tantrum, that will allow for the student to achieve their desire in an appropriate way.

**Schedules and Prompts:** From time to time students may tantrum because they don’t want to transition from a preferred activity to an activity that they dislike or to a task that they haven’t had much success with completing. Having the day’s or class schedule posted prominently as well as additional teacher prompts as to what activity is next allows the student to see what is coming next and can help alleviate some inappropriate behavior. It may be appropriate to count down time until the next transition by prompting at the 10, 5, 2, and 1 minute mark. This kind of consistency and prompting for good behavior provides the student with a precorrection of sorts. The teacher is telling the student when the change will happen and what appropriate behavior should look like.

**Effective Commands:** The delivery of effective commands includes a structured sequence of instructions, use of specific words, positive social reinforcement, and consequences for noncompliance. Effective commands are particularly useful with students who chronically engage in more noncompliant behaviors and who tend to argue with teachers.

**Behavioral Momentum:** This technique works by asking the student to do two or three things that the teacher knows the student would normally want to do. Then, the teacher follows the instances of positive behavior with a desired low-probability request (a task that the student may not usually want to do). For example a teacher could ask a student to assist with passing out papers, make sure everyone has the materials to complete the task, and then ask the student to complete the first four math problems on the worksheet.
Behavioral Interventions and Strategies Series: 
Managing Tantrum Behaviors

Consequent Strategies

Extinction techniques are the recommended response for ongoing and active tantrums. Extinction involves the removal of what may be reinforcing for the student. The most common extinction techniques are Ignoring and Time Out. It is critical to remember that if the tantruming behaviors have occurred for a longer period of time, it may take a longer period of time to reduce the frequency of tantrums using these procedures. Consistency is critical and without a planned and consistent response, the tantrum cycle will continue.

**Ignoring**
This can be difficult to implement at first because it is hard to do nothing while a student is engaging in a behavior that is so disruptive. Ignoring may also be difficult because the behavior may increase in intensity before it gets better. To ignore, the teacher needs to break eye contact with the student, not speak to the student (this provides attention), walk away, and provide attention to another student engaging in appropriate behavior. For a classroom setting, the teacher may want to have a go-to activity that allows the class to chorally respond or move to another location in the room to drown out the noise and show the tantruming student that there is more fun to be had when they behave appropriately. It is also important that the teacher explicitly teach the class how to ignore their classmates if they are engaging in inappropriate behavior. Always remember that ignoring may lead to behavior getting out of hand so use an explicit demand followed with a consequence for noncompliance.

**Time Out**
Many teachers may choose to stay away from the use of time out because of complicated procedures or they believe they need a specific “place” for the student. It is critical to remember that Time Out is not a specific chair or a lengthy turn in an aversive space. Time Out is removing the student from an interactive, attentive, engaging, and reinforcing environment to one that is much less reinforcing for misbehavior. If the student would rather be in time out then that should signal to the teacher that the classroom is far less engaging than believed. Time out would not work in this instance.

**For Your Information:** TIERS also has resources for Time Out, Effective Commands, & Consequences! Check it out on our resources page and let us know if you have questions!

Keep This In Mind!
- Extinction procedures, when used properly and consistently, can extinguish tantrum behaviors
- It may be difficult to ignore behavior or consistently use time out
- Collect data to evaluate if tantrum behavior is decreasing
- A plan and consistent implementation is critical to success
- There will be an initial and temporary increase in the tantrums. Tantrums may increase in frequency, duration, and/or intensity

References:


http://www.hdc.lsuhsc.edu/tiers/index.php