

Wrangling Tears and Tantrums

How to Keep Families Coming Back to the Library

TAMMIE BENHAM

Maintaining a professional demeanor when faced with a crying child is difficult. However, with some knowledge of child development, a willingness to help, and a few strategies, library professionals can help soothe a distraught child and build relationships with caregivers.

The active, noisy atmosphere in most library children's departments—pre-pandemic, of course!—is evidence that libraries understand and have embraced the importance of allowing children the latitude for play. Research tells us that play is the business of how children learn and what they speak about.¹

Many public libraries have embraced child development practices steeped in decades of research and now design play opportunities for their youngest patrons. These opportunities, especially when tied to quality literature for children, solidify the role of the library in supporting literacy development.² Most public librarians are prepared to defend the noisy work of children learning from those expecting a quieter library experience.

Yet the general din of children playing in the library doesn't prepare staff for children who are upset and crying loudly, and staff may be at a loss for what to do or how to help. Feeling under-prepared can result in anger and inappropriate comments or avoidance of families with small children. Astute library managers recognize unwelcoming attitudes and behaviors as an opportunity for skill building.

The same research on the importance of play and allowing children to practice and enjoy conversations in the library can

be helpful in framing a response to a crying child. Crying is a typical part of human development and the absence of crying in children may signal developmental delays. Very young children cry as a way to communicate they are hungry, need their diaper changed, are bored, or need attention.³

As children gain more language, crying can signal fear, anger, frustration, and pain, or that the child is overtired or overstimulated.⁴ How adults in the child's life, including community members, respond to a crying child impacts a child's development.⁵

Child development tells us that part of the amazing brain development that happens in children under six years old is something called executive function. "Executive function skills are the mental processes that enable us to plan, focus attention, remember instructions, and juggle multiple tasks successfully."⁶ These skills help humans with self-regulation, including control of the expression of emotions and impulses, such as crying or having a tantrum when leaving the library.

Most children ages three to six are developing executive function skills. Attending storytime, learning to sit and listen,



Tammie Benham is the Youth Services Consultant at Southeast Kansas Library System. She serves on the ALSC Managing Children's Services Committee and the ALSC Notable Books Committee.

learning to take turns with games and in conversation, and watching adults and other children practice these skills all help executive function develop.⁷

When children are distressed, their behavioral response system, also known as the “fight or flight response,” kicks into high gear and triggers the limbic system.⁸ The limbic system regulates and releases hormones that keep the body ready for “fight or flight,” including a hormone called cortisol.⁹ Cortisol levels that are chronically or persistently elevated over time can cause health problems, including chronic or toxic stress.¹⁰ Although one library trip ending in a child’s distress is not likely to be the cause of life-long health problems, any cortisol-releasing or traumatic event that can be avoided lessens the contribution over a child’s lifetime.

A caregiver’s rising tension as a result of their child’s behavior can be compounded by the reactions of other adults in the library, which can impact their response to the distraught child. They may yell at or bargain with the child or ignore them completely while the checkout transaction happens, finally exiting the library as quickly as possible. In this scenario, feelings associated with the trip to the library are not likely to be pleasant and may lower the chance of the family returning.¹¹

The behavioral response of fight or flight happens in the amygdala and hypothalamus regions toward the back of the brain. This is evolutionary survival at work, making the body react by running or fighting without logical thought. This area of the brain develops early in humans. The prefrontal cortex at the front of the brain, where logic and reasoning take place, is overruled when the fight or flight response is active.¹²

During a child’s distress, their logical, prefrontal cortex is on standby while their under-developed limbic system is reacting with a flight or fight response. The caregiver needs to stay calm enough that their own brain continues to think logically instead of emotionally. How can the library staff help caregivers stay calm and help children calm down? This desired outcome is more likely when all library staff understand and are educated about what to expect from a young child and how to help adults formulate a calming response.¹³

Providing a signal, such as getting a sticker from storytime staff or indicating it’s time to, “say goodbye to the fish,” helps establish a routine for leaving, which also helps build a child’s executive function.¹⁴

Additional strategies might include using a puppet to say goodbye, or pointing out interesting lights, windows, scooters, electric doors, or other interesting features within the space. Take some time, look around and make a plan. If what you choose doesn’t work, try again! Or, get co-workers or volunteers involved. What interesting things do they see on the way out the door? If there truly aren’t any obvious objects or

landmarks which are interesting to look at, now is a great time to bring something new into your space.

After the child has been offered the opportunity to use language skills to construct the reason for being upset, their brain switches from using the emotional, limbic brain to the prefrontal cortex, where thinking and reasoning happen.¹⁵ They have once again gained control of their emotions and is now using the developing executive function skills, which are being controlled by the prefrontal cortex.

Some other strategies that might work well when approaching families with crying children are the following:

1. When speaking to children directly, try to be at or close to their eye level but give them some space. Smile and keep your voice calm and reassuring.
2. Never try to take a crying child from an adult, their source of comfort. This impulse can be very strong, but talking a parent through the situation can help develop their skills to handle a similar situation when support isn’t present.
3. Not every adult is ready for, or open to, help. Rarely, an adult may ignore the help offered or shift some of the anger they feel at the situation onto library staff. If this happens, staff should try to remember to think with their own prefrontal cortex and understand they may be absorbing some of the anger that may otherwise have been directed at the child. Being empathetic and professional and waiting until a more private time to show an emotional response can de-escalate awkward or emotional situations.
4. If you try these strategies and they fail, give yourself credit for caring enough to try. Help is always preferable to judgement or blame and so much more friendly than making members of the community feel unwelcome in their library.

It is not uncommon to feel uncomfortable in a situation where a child is on the floor, perhaps having a tantrum while a harried adult is trying desperately to move through the checkout process and get out the door. The adult understands the library staff is upset and really doesn’t want their child to act out. However, young children rarely have mature emotional responses. Acting out, for them, is literally normal.

When a child is crying they are demanding a response.¹⁶ Use this time to help adults by reassuring them the behavior is typical for this age and not offensive to library staff. When help is accepted, reassure the child they are heard and understood and offer the chance to allow them to tell you why they are upset. Offer the child a routine, such as a sticker or goodbye to a pet or landmark.

When time is taken to build relationships with our library patrons that are welcoming and accepting, staff demonstrate they care about all patrons, even the very youngest. &

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