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Boston University
COPING WITH TEMPER TANTRUMS--HELP FOR FRAZZLED PARENTS

Boston, Mass.--Parents can minimize their children's temper tantrums by setting fewer limits but remaining firm when they set them. In the August issue of Contemporary Pediatrics, physicians from Boston City Hospital and Boston University School of Medicine (BUSM) outline strategies for dealing with tantrums.

Common during the toddler and preschool years, normal temper tantrums involve behaviors ranging from persistent angry crying to physical thrashing. Tantrums occur when children's emotions, such as anger or frustration, exceed their ability to manage them. They often take place when children's efforts for mastery and autonomy are thwarted by parents or by their own limitations. Since much of a child's development involves gaining control over the environment, his or her body or social interactions, frustration and its escalation into tantrums can be frequent.

While tantrums decline in prevalence as children age, not all children grow out of them on a predictable schedule. Parents trying to cope with children going through this difficult stage can minimize tantrums with effective parenting; well-disciplined children have fewer tantrums.

Parents can avoid futile power struggles by picking their battles carefully. Tantrums can offer an opportunity for growth when parents assist children to handle frustration and anger without tantrums. It is also important to give children some control over their lives by offering them frequent choices, such as which one of several outfits to wear. "Although it may be time consuming to present several options to children, the process of choosing teaches them very important lessons about self-determination," says -more-
Robert Needlman, M.D., a fellow in the Division of Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics at BUSM.

Other suggestions for parents include:

- Distracting the child to a more acceptable activity when frustration begins to mount.
- Minimizing the need for "no's" by childproofing the house.
- Handling a preschooler's tantrums by ignoring the tantrum. Parents can carry on activities silently within sight of the child.
- Realizing that some preschoolers may need to be held in order to regain control.
- Establishing rules with older children to take a "Time Out" or go to their rooms until they calm down.

The authors discourage spanking and threatening children. "Although these methods may halt the tantrums, there is a developmental cost to the child," says Needlman. "Kids may be scared enough to stop tantrums, but their self-esteem and growing sense of their ability to make decisions suffers."

The authors point out that tantrums in children older than four or younger than one, or tantrums that occur regularly during school may be symptoms of more serious problems. Parental, child or interactional factors—such as too much or too little parental control, the child's temperament or disability, or a poor fit between the child's needs, temperament and abilities and the parent's expectations—may contribute to problem tantrums. Treatment of severe tantrums requires recognition of the factors contributing to the tantrums and the use of behavior modification techniques, such as "Time Out." If children don't respond to these techniques, family therapy may be necessary.

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