

Andrea Larmon, Ph.D, BCBA

How to Navigate Tantrums in Public and at Home



MESSAGE FROM DR. ANDREA

Dear Reader,

First things first, take a deep breath. You are not alone and you are doing better than you think.

If you have ever found yourself in the middle of a grocery store aisle, a restaurant, or your own living room, wondering how to respond to a full-blown meltdown while every eye in the room seems to be watching, this book was written just for you. There is no judgment here. Only understanding, warmth, and a whole lot of practical guidance from someone who has spent decades working with children and the incredible families who love them.

Tantrums are one of the most universal, and most misunderstood, parts of childhood. They can feel overwhelming, embarrassing, and emotionally exhausting. But here is what I want you to know from the very start: **a tantrum is not a reflection of your worth as a parent or caregiver.** It is a child's way of communicating something they don't yet have the words or skills to express. And that means it is something we can work with together.

In this book, we are going to explore one of the most effective and compassionate behavioral strategies available to parents and caregivers — **Planned Ignoring.** Now, I know what you might be thinking *ignoring my child doesn't feel right.* And I completely understand that feeling. But I promise you, Planned Ignoring is not about dismissing your child or their emotions. It is a thoughtful, intentional and loving approach to gently reducing attention-seeking behaviors by teaching children that calm, positive behavior is the most powerful way to connect with the people they love most.

Whether you are navigating tantrums at home during bedtime routines or managing meltdowns in the most public of places, this book will walk you through exactly what to do, what to say and how to stay calm and confident in even the most challenging moments.

You already have everything it takes to be the parent your child needs. Let these pages simply remind you of that, and give you a few more tools to carry along the way.

Let's take this one step at a time — together.

♥ Dr. Andrea



Planned Ignoring is a thoughtful, intentional, and loving approach to gently reducing attention-seeking behavior.

Ever been in a store and watched your child get so upset that they act out—yelling, hitting, biting?

Well, the good news is, we've got some strategies to help you navigate those situations. In this document, we'll explore what they are and how to put them into action.

First, let's talk about Planned Ignoring.

This is a behavioral intervention that helps reduce attention-seeking behaviors by intentionally withholding attention for those behaviors. We're not ignoring the child; we're ignoring the behavior itself. As soon as it stops, or they ask for something calmly, we immediately give them Behavior Specific Praise (see my BSP booklet). It works by removing the reinforcement.

When might we use planned ignoring?

For undesired but harmless behavior. Do not use it for harmful behaviors such as hitting or biting unless you are using a blocking procedure at the same time.

Steps for Planned Ignoring:

- When the problem behavior occurs, ignore the behavior.
- Planned ignoring helps stop attention-seeking behaviors. Do not say anything or make eye contact with your child while the problem behavior is going on.
- If your child wants an object and they do not ask for it in the way you taught them, ignore it.
- If your child asks for something that is not available:
 - Tell them they cannot have the item at that time
 - Direct their attention to another activity
 - Use planned ignoring if there are problem behaviors after the redirect
- Do not give your child anything when they appear dysregulated. For example, do not give your child a toy if they are crying. Wait until the child is calm and the crying has stopped, then you can give them the toy when they ask for it in a calm way.
- When the child is acting out, it's best to avoid eye contact, facial expressions, or comments. Try to stay completely silent.
- Don't change how you act, your tone, or your expression when the child is misbehaving. Keep your facial expression and voice neutral. If you can't do this, they might notice and realize they're affecting your behavior, which can be tiring, frustrating, or embarrassing for you.

Key Principles and Implementation

Focus on Attention-Seeking Behavior:

Use this approach only for behaviors that are meant to get a reaction, not for dangerous, destructive, or safety-related actions.

Consistency is Key:

The behavior should be ignored every time it happens, or it might get worse.

Pair with Positive Reinforcement:

Praise or give attention to the child when they're behaving appropriately (this is called "attending").

Remove All Attention:

Do not look, speak, or make physical contact with the child during the episode.

Be Patient with the "Extinction Burst":

The unwanted behavior might get worse before it gets better, as the child tries harder to get a reaction. If you "give in," that's the level of behavior they'll exhibit next time they want something. They won't try to escalate it, they'll start at that level.

Benefits

- It helps reduce minor, disruptive behaviors in classrooms and homes.
- It teaches children that appropriate behavior is the way to get attention.
- It helps adults manage behaviors without constantly yelling or punishing.

Potential Drawbacks and Risks

Extinction Burst:

The behavior temporarily intensifies, which can be exhausting or difficult to manage.

Using It Inappropriately:

If you use it for serious, safety-related, or emotional behaviors, it can make the child feel ignored, unsupported, or unsafe.

It Needs High Consistency:

If the adult gives in during an extinction burst, it reinforces the behavior even more.

Doesn't Teach New Skills:

It just stops the unwanted behavior, but it doesn't show the child how to act the right way. It's best to use it with BSP and skills training for the areas they need help with.

Common Examples in Practice

Classroom:

A teacher ignores a student making silly noises while they are instructing, but praises the student immediately upon sitting quietly.

Home:

A parent ignores a child's whining for candy at the store, only interacting with them when they stop whining.

NEXT STEPS

Here are some other strategies that can help you and your child have a successful trip out. And remember, there's no shame in adjusting your child's behavior. You're doing what's best for them and how they're feeling in the moment.

Pre-teaching expectations before going out in public

Make sure you've explained the expected behavior in each place you'll be visiting on this trip.

Make sure you've talked about where you're going and why.

What the child can expect if they do well in each place. It's a good idea to reinforce each place if you're going to multiple locations on a trip.

"If we are successful at the grocery store, you may have...."

"If you have a calm body at the post office, you may have..."

Practice those expectations

Don't assume your child knows how to do those behavior expectations.

Show them what the expected behavior looks and feels like by modeling and role-playing.

It's okay to leave an environment if you can't help your child regulate. Here's how to leave the situation with grace and dignity.

Let the cashier or employee know what you're planning. "We're going to take a little break to regulate and then come back." Or you can decide not to return if that's what you both need right now.

You can leave the store and go to your car to try to re-regulate. If that doesn't work, you can go home. If this happens, they won't get the reward you talked about in the pre-teaching step.

You can also let people around you know what is happening and what you are doing. "My child is having difficulty regulating their emotions. I am using a prescribed method to regulate them."