

# Introduction to *Tears and Tantrums*

This is the introduction to Aletha Solter's book, *Tears and Tantrums: What to do when babies and children cry*. Original copyright © 1998 by Aletha Solter. This introduction is from the 2019 printing. All rights reserved.

For more information about this book: <http://www.awareparenting.com/tearsandtantrums.html>

## About the author

Aletha Solter, PhD, is a Swiss/American developmental psychologist, international speaker, consultant, and founder of the Aware Parenting Institute ([www.awareparenting.com](http://www.awareparenting.com)). Her books have been translated into many languages, and she is recognized internationally as an expert on attachment, trauma, and non-punitive discipline.

## A huge misunderstanding

Children's tears and tantrums are some of the most difficult behaviors for parents to cope with. In fact, parents ask more questions about crying than about any other topic. They are often baffled when their babies wake up crying at night, when their two-year-olds throw temper tantrums, or when their four-year-olds whine all day. Parents wonder whether it is appropriate to comfort, ignore, distract, punish, "give in," or listen empathically. Some parents feel rejected or worry that their child is immature, manipulative, or "spoiled." Tears and tantrums can also trigger strong anger in parents and lead to child abuse.

I have been researching the topic of crying since 1984 and have made some interesting discoveries about the role of crying in healthy development. My two first books: *The Aware Baby* and *Helping Young Children Flourish* (revised in 2018 with the title, *Cooperative and Connected*) describe an approach that I call "Aware Parenting." It combines attachment-style parenting, non-punitive discipline, and acceptance of emotional release (through crying, play, and laughter). These books have been translated into several languages, and I have led workshops for parents and professionals in many countries. Because of the considerable interest for my innovative ideas about crying, I compiled that information into this book.

There has been a huge misunderstanding about the meaning and purpose of tears and tantrums. During the Middle Ages in Europe, many people believed that children who had frequent tantrums were possessed by a demon or devil. Parents were advised to beat the devil out of the child or find a priest to do an exorcism. Many parents also used drugs such as opiates or alcohol to calm their crying infants. This search for a chemical solution has continued in the form of psychiatric drugs.

During the 18th century, the blame for children's tears and tantrums gradually shifted to the parents, who were told that they had been too indulgent and had "spoiled" their children. Parents were advised to become more strict and to punish children for these "misbehaviors" or at least resist "giving in" to the children's demands. Parenting manuals from the 18<sup>th</sup> century through

much of the 20th century explained how to “break the will of the child” to produce docility and unquestioning obedience.

For example, the following quote is from a book published in Germany in 1748:

As far as willfulness is concerned, this expresses itself as a natural recourse in tenderest childhood as soon as children are able to make their desire for something known by means of gestures. They see something they want but cannot have; they become angry, cry, and flail about. Or they are given something that does not please them; they fling it aside and begin to cry. These are dangerous faults that hinder their entire education and encourage undesirable qualities in children. If willfulness and wickedness are not driven out, it is impossible to give a child a good education. The moment these flaws appear in a child, it is high time to resist this evil so that it does not become ingrained through habit and the children do not become thoroughly depraved.

Nowadays a surprising number of books for parents still give similar advice. Authors often list temper tantrums in chapters dealing with “misbehaviors” such as hitting, biting, lying, and stealing, and advise parents to ignore or punish these outbursts. At best, parents and teachers are advised to help children express their wants and feelings using words rather than tears and tantrums, which are considered to be immature and unacceptable. Babies are still accused of “manipulating” their parents by crying. Many psychologists and doctors still advise parents to ignore their babies’ cries in order to break this habit and to teach babies to soothe themselves.

At the other extreme is the more recent “back-to-nature” movement that recommends responding to every cry with a nurturing, soothing response (such as nursing or rocking), to quiet down the baby. Advocates of this approach are justifiably reacting against centuries of harmful advice. However, this approach, loving as it may appear to be, still fails to recognize an important function of crying. Furthermore, it places an impossible burden on parents by making them believe that their job is to stop babies and children from crying.

This book proposes an entirely new way of thinking about crying and raging, representing a breakthrough in understanding children’s needs and emotions. It is best if babies and children who cry are never ignored. Their cries should always receive a nurturing response. However, *not all crying is an indication of an immediate need or want*. Much of it is a natural stress-release mechanism that allows children to heal from the effects of frightening or frustrating experiences that have occurred previously. Children use tears and tantrums to resolve trauma and release tensions. It is therefore not the caretaker’s job to stop the crying or raging, because these behaviors are, in themselves, basic needs from birth on.

An understanding of the healing effects of tears and tantrums can have beneficial consequences. In addition to helping children resolve trauma and release stress, an acceptance of crying and raging can play a crucial role in preventing discipline problems and reducing hyperactivity as well as harmful behavior towards others (violence). Crying can also contribute to better physical and emotional health, attention span, and ability to learn. An added benefit of this approach is that it can help resolve sleep problems (without ignoring the child). Finally, supportive listening of children when they need to cry helps to strengthen the adult/child relationship.

My goal in writing this book is to help parents and others involved with young children to understand and correctly interpret children's crying and raging, and to respond in ways that best promote optimal development. I discuss the sources of stress that cause a need for crying, the ways in which adults typically repress crying in children, and I suggest nurturing approaches to facilitate crying as an important form of emotional release. I have gathered information from a wide variety of sources, including psychological, biochemical, physiological, and cross-cultural studies, as well as personal experiences from parents and teachers.

Children's tears and tantrums elicit strong feelings in adults. A survey in the United States asked new mothers to describe their feelings when they were unable to quiet their crying infants. The mothers mentioned feeling exasperated, afraid, anxious, unloving, resentful, and confused. Many had low self-confidence. Some even felt extreme hostility toward their infants. Similar results were found in a survey of mothers in England and Australia. In this study, 80% of mothers whose babies cried extensively mentioned feeling depressed, and 50% of them felt a strong urge to hit their babies.

Not surprisingly, crying has been linked to child abuse. In a survey of battered infants, *80% of the parents reported that excessive crying by their infant had triggered the abuse*. After the first year, many parents continue to become very upset when their children cry or rage. This occurs especially if the reason for the crying is unclear, or if the child's outburst seems to be unjustified by the incident that triggered it. Some parents feel a strong urge to punish their children at these times.

Parents need correct information, reassurance, and constructive ways of handling their children's emotional outbursts. This will contribute greatly to a reduction in child abuse and to a more harmonious family life. Teachers and caretakers can also benefit from this information.

This book is divided into four parts. Part I gives some basic information about the stress-release function of crying and raging. It reviews the research on the physiological and psychological benefits, the uses of crying in therapy with children, and the differences in crying between men and women. It also introduces the concepts of repression and control patterns.

Part II discusses crying in infants up to one year of age, and Part III discusses crying and raging in children from one to eight years of age.

In Part IV, I describe some practical applications, emphasizing the concept of creating emotional safety for children. I also discuss the feelings triggered in adults by children's tears and tantrums, as well as steps people can take to feel more tolerant. There is a section with firsthand accounts by parents using this approach, and another section in which I answer the questions most commonly asked by parents and teachers during my workshops. The book concludes with advice for professionals who work with parents about ways of supporting parents.

I am hoping that the information in this book will help people to understand children and themselves better, thereby contributing to a happier and more peaceful world.

The main points are summarized on the following page.

## **Summary of major points**

1. All children experience some stress, no matter how loving the parents are. An important function of crying is to release stress and promote healing,
2. Adults often try to repress crying in children out of a misunderstanding of crying, and because it arouses their own unresolved stress and need to cry. This repression of crying is passed on from one generation to the next.
3. In response to an environment in which crying is not accepted, children acquire certain rigid behavior patterns to keep themselves from crying.
4. The consequences of this repression of crying include emotional and behavioral problems, failure of children to reach their full potential, and later stress-related illnesses.
5. These negative consequences can be reversed when adults learn the benefits of crying, overcome their own obstacles to feeling, and provide children with the emotional safety that is needed in order to cry and heal from the effects of stress.