

PUBLIC DISPLAYS OF DISASTER: WHAT TO DO WHEN YOUR CHILD LOSES IT OUTSIDE THE HOME



Jacob, almost 3 years old, has thrown himself on the floor of the grocery store screaming that he must have one more chocolate, just one more! Sound familiar? If so, you are not alone. Most parents of young children live in terror of their little one losing it in public.



It's hard to avoid feeling judged and ashamed of out-of-control behavior, as if it is evidence of total incompetence as a parent, surely a result of your indulgence which has inevitably created a spoiled child. And for parents who don't particularly care what others think, it can just be exhausting and frustrating when you are trying to get something done. This experience naturally puts parents themselves in an emotionally charged place, feeling embarrassed and often angry at their child for putting them in this nasty situation.

So, what can you do in these moments to reduce the stress both for yourself and your child—with the added benefit of feeling competent and effective instead of weak and mortified? Don't let the onlookers get to you. Ideally, just tune them out or, kill them with kindness.

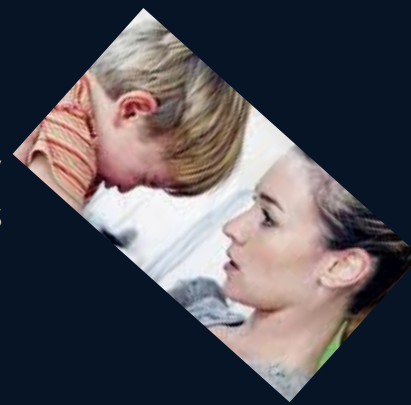


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If a bystander makes some really helpful (not!) comment ("I think he's hungry"... "His diaper may be dirty"), avoid being reactive. You have nothing to be defensive about. Instead, try: "It is so nice that you want to help. I really appreciate it. But I'm all good. Learning that he can't get everything he wants is a hard lesson for a little guy, right?" This is a nice way to send some important messages: "I am in control, and I am being a really good parent by setting appropriate limits and helping my child learn to cope with life's disappointments." This can be a particularly good strategy when it is your mother, or mother-in-law, or another close friend or family member who is trying to help.

STAY CALM

If you are anxious and upset, your child is more likely to be anxious and upset. If you are calm and composed, she is likely to pull herself together more quickly. So while your emotional reaction is completely understandable, it is not strategic to come on strong, because it tends to escalate rather than calm your child. When she is falling apart, she needs you to be her rock. Best to take a few deep breaths and remind yourself that, if you lose it too, it will likely make the situation at hand more stressful and challenging.



VALIDATE YOUR CHILD'S FEELINGS

Validating feelings is not the same as validating behavior. Feelings aren't the problem—they just are. It's what kids (and parents) do with their feelings that can be problematic. That's why one of your most important jobs is to help your child learn to manage these strong, difficult emotions in ways that are pro-social. But that takes time and practice. And it starts with validation—which helps children feel understood—and is the first step in helping them identify and then manage these emotions.

Learn More at: <https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/340-public-displays-of-disaster-what-to-do-when-your-child-loses-it-outside-the-home>

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