

Episode Transcript

Tantrum Survival Guide with Dr. Schrag Herschberg

Psychologists Off The Clock

Dr. Schrag Herschberg: [00:00:00] I have two young boys and I know, therefore personally, and also because I do this professionally, just how many things that are to read about parenting and do this and don't do that. And you have to get it exactly right. And there's this formula and you can mess up your kids so easily. And we just get bogged down in the anxiety surrounding that. And so one of the things that I focus on in the book is that the research that has gotten the most traction over the years and for which there's the most empirical support is quite simple, which is that kids thrive when parents provide high levels of love and high levels of limits. That kids need both.

Diana Hill: [00:00:52] We are four clinical psychologists here to bring you cutting edge and science-based ideas from psychology to help you flourish in your relationships, work and health.

Debbie Sorensen: [00:01:00] I'm Dr. Debbie Sorensen, practicing in mile high Denver, Colorado.

Diana Hill: [00:01:04] I'm Dr. Diana Hill, practicing in seaside Santa Barbara, California.

Yael Schonbrun: [00:01:08] From coast to coast, I'm Dr. Yael Schonbrun, a Boston-based clinical psychologist and assistant professor at Brown University.

Jill Stoddard: [00:01:14] And from sunny San Diego, I'm Dr. Jill Stoddard, director of the Center for Stress and Anxiety Management.

Debbie Sorensen: [00:01:20] We hope you take what you learn here to build a rich and meaningful life.

Diana Hill: [00:01:23] Thank you for listening to Psychologists Off The Clock.

audio_only_16778242_Psychologists_Of: [00:01:27] I shared my excitement about this new episode, surviving toddler tantrums with all the co-hosts and Jill, you sent me this beautiful video of a dad and his two year old, the video's called beautiful twos from Joel Mitchell, and it's a three minute long video of a father sitting calmly on the floor with his two year old who's having this prolonged. Pretty distressing tantrum. So I'm wondering gel for you, what, what came up for you and, and what caused you to think about sending it along to me.

Jill Stoddard: [00:01:53] Well, I had sort of this mixed reaction to it, so I thought it was beautiful and admirable, and I loved that this dad was able to sit calmly and just sort of wait out. This tantrum. And I mean, I was impressed, really. Um, but, and it was, it was lovely and it was loving. And I had this really strong emotional response, like positive, tearful, kind of emotional response. But then I also had this other response of feeling like, Oh, I could never do that, and I'm such a bad mom. Um. Because I just, I wouldn't be feeling calm. And I realized that I sort of assumed he, the dad was feeling calm because he

appeared calm or he was acting calmly with his child when that may not at all have been what was happening on the inside.

And I really loved how in this episode, you guys talked a lot about, um, you know, kind of having both of those experiences. And. She talks about how to reconnect with our own experience of love, even when our kids are being difficult, but also like not feeling shame when we have kind of negative internal experiences in response to some of these really difficult, um, you know, the, when the kids are having tantrums and being, being tough.

Yael: [00:03:14] Yeah. I think it is so much about. Managing your own internal experience and then still figuring out the most effective way to respond in the moment to a child's tantrum. And I think this YouTube video that we'll link to really does show that. And Dr Hirshberg really talks us through some of the real concrete on the ground strategies for managing sort of this complicated set of things that happens. You know, you're trying to figure out how to get your child to calm down. You're trying to manage your own distress. You're trying to be as effective as you can in teaching. You're trying to continue to stay connected and loving, and it is a lot of complicated things that are happening. And I love that you point out that, you know, one of the most important things is not to shame ourselves or feel too badly about all the experiences that we're having, because most of them are just normal and natural, just as normal and natural as the tantrums themselves are. So I did want to just also reassure our listeners, if you do check out this YouTube video, it does end with the tantrum calming and the dad and the child in this beautiful, loving embrace.

The dads rocking the child and they're both leaning into one another with this deep sweetness. And I also wanted to leave you with some of the lyrics to the song that plays. Uh, throughout this video, it, the song is patient love by passenger, and the lyrics are so beautiful and so perfect for, um, the idea of how parents can, you know, stay loving with their children even in difficult periods. And the lyrics go as follows and **though** the sand may be washed by the sea and the old will be lost in the new, well, four will not wait for three, for three. Never waited for two. And though you will not wait for me, I'll wait for you. We hope you'll join us in learning some of this powerful though sometimes hard to access tantrum jujitsu advice that our guest expert, dr Rebecca Schrag Hirschberg writes about and teaches.

Today. I have dr Rebecca Schrag Hirschberg joining me to discuss her new book, which is titled the tantrum survival guide. Tune into your toddler's mind and your own to calm the craziness and make family fun again. Rebecca is a clinical psychologist and founder of the little house calls psychological services, which is aimed at helping kids and their parents manage common early childhood challenges.

Welcome, Rebecca.

Dr. Schrag Hirschberg: [00:05:28] Thanks so much. I'm so happy to be here.

Yael: [00:05:31] I'm so happy to have you here to talk about this very important topic. As the parent of three boys, the youngest of whom is three and is like, you know, dead in the heat of tantrum life. Um, I'm excited to. Gain your wisdom and, and reading your book actually gave me a lot of really cool new ideas for how to

handle the tantrums that are inevitable with young kids.

But I wanted to just have you start off by telling us a little bit about what your objective is in the tantrum survival guide. Because I just want to say from the outset, it's not, it's not to get rid of tantrums altogether.

Dr. Schrag Herschberg: [00:06:02] No, it is not to get rid of tantrums all together. I think that is not realistic. And I put that forth very early in the book. Tantrums are developmentally appropriate, even healthy. And so part of the goal is just that is making parents aware that there's nothing wrong with their child, or frankly wrong with their parenting if their children are having tantrums, which generally children do at these ages.

Yael: [00:06:27] tantrums are so common that, you know, we see them coming across social media in sometimes hilarious forms. And I actually wanted to talk to you just quickly about your New York times op ed piece, about how parents sometimes post pictures or commentary on their kid tantrums. And what's your take on, on why and what parents should do when impulse strikes to share a hilarious anecdotes about child tantrums.

Dr. Schrag Herschberg: [00:06:55] Yeah. And, and this is, it's one of those times that parents, like so many things have to walk a fine line or sort of do a dance, whatever metaphor you prefer, because it's, it's great to find humor in our kids. Our kids are little people there. They're hilarious. And some of the things that they get really upset about because they are kids and we are adults with, you know, full functioning, at least most of the time, brains seem silly or seem ridiculous or outrageous or, you know, the example I think we used in the op ed piece was a little kid having a tantrum about the fact that his water was too wet. And the funny kind of to my mind gets disparaging when your child is genuinely in distress about it and you sort of snap a picture and post that picture for the public to see and laugh and to me the best litmus test of that is what I want someone to just not my picture.

In a moment of distress like this, because no matter what we think of the reason for their distress, their distress itself is real.

Yael Toddler Tantrum: [00:08:01] Yeah.

Dr. Schrag Herschberg: [00:08:02] And that's important to remember when we're, when we're finding humor in it.

Yael: [00:08:07] I like that you point out that it is a fine line because I do think that there's some utility in finding humor cause it sort of lightens it and makes it a bit more tolerable to endure. Um. And the reality is like for us, it does feel a little bit ridiculous. But as you're saying, it's important to sort of see the other side, which is that your toddler is really experiencing something that feels really painful and frustrating and overwhelming, and to sort of hold both of those at the same time, I think is, is one of the strategies, and we'll talk a lot more, um, about the, the various strategies that you offer in your book.

But I think it's useful to just acknowledge that there. Can be some humor and at the same time that we need to validate what the experience is like for our toddlers in respectful ways. All right, so toddlers have tantrums. That is a truth that you don't deny in your book, and that none of us parents can deny.

So given that we can't create a world where tantrums don't exist, though, wouldn't that be nice? What is your goal with this book? What is your goal in

terms of what you're helping parents work towards?

Dr. Schrag Herschberg: [00:09:15] Yeah. I think there's, there's a few goals. The first is for parents to understand better kind of what tantrums are and the function that they serve. The second is to, without a doubt, on a pragmatic level, reduce their frequency, their intensity and their duration. Um, because certainly tantrums are inevitable, but they are not necessarily inevitable 10 times a day for 15 minutes each.

Um, and part of that goal involves the goal of having parents recognize the part that they play. I talk a lot about tantrum interactions. And the way the tantrums escalate. And certainly I'm not the first, you know, I don't get credit for doing that, but, but tantrums are, are interpersonal in nature. And so for parents to have a better understanding of, Oh, what part they play in the cycle.

And then finally to offer really pragmatic tips about difficult times of day, difficult settings, difficult circumstances, um, almost like a how to guide for just throwing a lot of strategies at the wall and seeing what sticks.

Yael: [00:10:22] that, that for me was so useful to just, um, in the latter part of the book where you just kind of lay out, like, here are some things to try and what all sort of foreshadow, because we'll get into more detail about this, but you talk about sort of daily habits to build ways that you can. Kinda catch it at the very early side.

Ways that you can catch it as it's beginning was that you can interrupt it while you're in the depths of it, and then ways that you can repair more quickly afterwards. And I think that there are so many different strategies to try, and so it is helpful to recognize both that tantrums are normal, but that we don't just have to sit there and allow them to happen, that there are some ways that we can interact more effectively with our child around the tantrum to as you're.

Saying to reduce their frequency intensity and to just help ourselves tolerate it more effectively as well as our kids to be able to tolerate it more effectively. So let's start with your definition of tantrums, because this is sort of a colloquial term, and you spend some time in your book talking about like what tantrums are and what they're not.

So can you share with us a little bit about your definition.

Dr. Schrag Herschberg: [00:11:29] Sure. My definition of a tantrum is a really general one. It's kind of as simple as it gets, which is just that it's a behavioral manifestation of really strong feelings. And I think that people throw the word around and that's fine. It's not offensive in any way. Um, I think it, the biggest misconception is that a tantrum will always stem from a child not getting something they want, that it's always about we're not getting their way.

And frankly, a tantrum is just big feelings. And so it can be. Anxiety that's behind a tantrum. It can be just general overwhelm. Um, that's behind a tantrum. It can certainly, as we know, as adults, as well as kids, hunger or exhaustion, um, it's essentially having really big feelings that for whatever reason, in that moment, you cannot handle in any other way other than a kind of behavioral meltdown.

Yael: [00:12:27] , and I mean, your book is really targeting tantrums among kids ages about two to four, which is kind of the height of when these kinds of behavioral collections happen. But as you're saying, like we all. To some extent, all human functioning adults and children have tantrums. We all had these

overwhelming feelings, and sometimes they get their better of us. So in some ways, even though the book is really targeting young kids, toddlers, um, I think a lot of these conceptualizations and practices are, are quite useful across the age spectrum.

I will say that.

Dr. Schrag Herschberg: [00:13:04] Various descriptions are useful for having teenagers. But also, I recently had a psychologist, a colleague, um, tell me that she's given it to partners who's like, people whose partners are having big tempers, not dangerous, not DV or anything like that, but just people whose partners are very emotionally reactive and they don't understand why or how to deal with it.

And she said that my book, although it has toddler on the cover, has been helpful for those marriages, which I was very, I was honored.

Yael: [00:13:33] I'm thinking of a second edition where you just take the tantrum part or the toddler part out and market it to like a broader, broader spectrum.

Dr. Schrag Herschberg: [00:13:42] like with the red line, you know, like at the top of the bar.

Yael: [00:13:46] Yeah, definitely. But when it comes to toddlers specifically, um, you know, there, there is something very particular about the brain development that helps to explain why tantrums happen so often.

And you talk a bit about how expectations. Of parents for how toddlers should respond are really important to set realistically. And so I wonder if you can actually walk us through a little bit about the brain development of toddlers and in how we can understand why that causes these kinds of behavioral meltdowns.

Dr. Schrag Herschberg: [00:14:18] Yeah, yeah, for sure. And I just want to kind of cite the research that you alluded to, which was a really big study that was conducted by the zero to three foundation and the bayzos foundation where they found that 50% of of parents in the United States of America very much overestimate what two and three year olds are capable of, specifically when it comes to impulse control and aggression. And I see that all the time with my clients. Um, and so that's, that's sort of the part that we're talking about where. The analogy that I use sometimes when I'm giving talks is I'll ask an audience member to, to ask their question in Japanese, presuming that they don't know Japanese or an ancient Greek, and they'll look at me and I'll say, no, I want you to ask it in ancient Greek and , and they get a little confused, and I obviously stop it before it gets out of hand, but that that may be how a toddler feels when we are consistently asking them to do something that their brain is not capable of doing. And the reason their brain is not capable of doing it is because the prefrontal cortex, which is the part of the brain that's responsible for impulse control, executive functioning, which includes things like reasoning, planning, judgment. Inhibiting these types of behaviors that come with tantrums. That part of the brain is not nearly fully developed.

It's really only in the very beginnings of development in toddlerhood. And so particularly when kids. Are in an emotional state. When they're upset, when they're upset, they can't access. The neural pathways do not exist between the emotional part of their brain and the part of their brain that is devoted to those

higher level inhibition or impulse control or planning or judgment skills. And so you have sort of a walking talking. Oh, emotion brain without anything to, to curb it. And that's when we see these behaviors. And that's not always something that we see when kids are not upset. So I'll frequently have parents say to me, you know, he knows not to hit his sister. We just talked about it. He can say to me that hitting is bad. And then four minutes later he's, you know, punching his sister and it's like, right, because she did something that upset him. And once. He's kind of, as Dan Siegel said, flipped his lid. The prefrontal cortex has disconnected from the emotion part. He's purely in the emotion part, and so anything he knows cognitively he can't access.

Yael: [00:16:58] Yeah, it goes right out the window, and I actually copied this quote from your book because it just really gets to the heart of it and is very, it's exactly what you just said about, um, trying to get somebody to say something in Japanese when they just don't know Japanese. But the quote is trying to get an emotional toddler to see reason is like speaking louder and louder to somebody who is told you he doesn't speak the language.

And I think. This is something that it's really useful to just keep reminding yourself, because trying to have a rational argument with a toddler who's feeling emotional is gonna frustrate the toddler, and it's gonna just really SAP your strength. There are more effective strategies to figuring out how to go move forward, but continuing to try to logic it out isn't, isn't one of them.

And I think that's, it's useful to know what doesn't work so that you can expend your resources more wisely.

Dr. Schrag Herschberg: [00:17:53] Especially when that's where nine out of 10 parents fall, because it's, we're not used to interacting with people who don't have prefrontal cortexes, and in fact, we're taught. That if anyone is showing signs of that, they should be avoided. And then, you know, so parents go to what they're used to, which is no, you know, water is wet.

You can't have water that's not wet. Let me explain what water is to you. It's our go to, and it's completely understandable, but it's, it's not going to land with someone who's really upset the same way that frankly, when we're really upset and someone jumps to a rational explanation, and I certainly, I think, give it examples in my book that involved my husband and myself.

Um,

Yael Toddler Tantrum: [00:18:35] those

Yael: [00:18:36] examples.

Dr. Schrag Herschberg: [00:18:36] yeah. Yeah. I mean, it's not, it doesn't land. It doesn't, until we feel kind of heard and seen and understood. The, the logic of it doesn't, doesn't impact where we are in terms of our heightened emotional arousal.

Yael: [00:18:53] Yeah. I was going to actually mention that. So you had, you had talked about earlier how your book is now being by some people given to people who are working with couples. And, and it was something that I thought about as I was reading, cause I do a lot of couples work that one of the things that I'm often counseling couples on is.

Before you get to problem solving, you first have to take the emotion down a notch because if the emotion is too high, there's no clarity of thought and you

can't sort of get on the same page about even what the problem is. And so step one is I was to validate and just bring the emotion down. And until you do that, there's really no utility in trying to do any problem solving.

So that is a bit what you're trying to do, although you're not necessarily going to get to very clever problem solving with your toddler, but really you first have to just focus on meeting them where they're at emotionally. And you talk a lot about that. The other part that, um, I think is really useful to think some about is, and you go into, Oh, a lot of detail about this, is that toddlers are by developmental necessity, impulsive, rigid in desire of control and egocentric.

And they wonder if you can talk a little bit about how that fits into how we should approach tantrums in terms of how we understand them.

Dr. Schrag Herschberg: [00:20:09] Yeah, so I mean, those are like the four.

Therefore. Greatest hits of toddlers and developmentally appropriate for them. I mean, they are learning that they are there individual people in a big world and that they have their own agency. Um, and yet they still feel like they are the center of the world. So for example, with the egocentrism, when I always use the example of when toddlers see candy at the supermarket.

I, they ask for it as they do, and you say no, they really genuinely don't understand why it's even there. If it's not for them. They don't understand that, that other perspectives exist until they develop theory of mind, you know, by four or five. Um, and so. When we're trying to explain, well, other people need the candy and it's not for us.

We're going to leave. It's like, well, once we leave, that store disappears. So seriously, why can't we just grab all the candy and, um, you know, similarly with the rigid piece, I have so many clients ask me, you know, I'm, I'm afraid that my child has OCD. She needs the fork this exact way, and she can't have the potatoes touching the peas.

And she needs me to read the same page of the book 14 times. And if I mess up a word, it doesn't count. We have to do it again. And of course, again, if we saw any of these behaviors in adults, it would be concerning on a whole different level. But these are little children trying to make sense of their world and trying to exert control in the small ways that they have it and trying to make things predictable.

When they're learning slowly in a way that they don't understand when they're babies. Just how unpredictable the larger world can be. And so those four characteristics that you mentioned, all help them make sense of their world and understand themselves and their relationships. And yet they're the exact pitfalls, or I should say the exact characteristics that lead to the pitfalls that become the biggest kind of tantrum interactions.

Yael: [00:22:11] I'm just thinking as you're talking about, last night we had ice cream for dessert and I have a three year old and um, he finished his quite quickly and then he looked to me and my husband and said, I have an idea. How about I finish yours. And we were both kind of like, I dunno, I kind of want the ice cream too, but what do we do here?

Cause you know, we could give it to him and allow him to feel good. But once that's over, he'll still be really upset that it's over. Because for him, as soon as the suites are finished, whenever that may come, there's just this incredible

disappointment and this desire for it to continue. And. Not as much now as there used to be, but it used not that long ago.

He would regularly have a meltdown as soon as dessert was over and it made it feel like, why are we even bothering to have dessert? It's so unpleasant at the end.

Dr. Schrag Herschberg: [00:23:07] And that's a great question to ask yourselves, right? Because different kids have different needs and. Again, having nothing to do with nutrition. You know, it sounds like the cost maybe wasn't worth it. But that aside, I think you're hitting on a really important point, which is that parents frequently feel like there are only two options, you know, one being to give in and the other one being to just toe the line in a very firm, you know? No, no, no, no, no. Way, and in fact, and this is getting at the more pragmatic, but there's so many ways to set limits in between that. And you know, this is a perfect example of where you might say to your son, like, I know, you know, I wish dessert could last for ever. I wish we never did anything in the whole wide world except sit and eat ice cream, you know?

And so you're not giving him more ice cream. But you're not just saying, no, you can't have more. I said, no. I said, no, no more. You're, you're joining with him in a connected, emotional way and often going back to our other conversation that that's what he needs. He, he, he needs to feel like you get it. You get just how much he wants to keep eating ice cream.

And sometimes that alone will come with the emotional intensity of the situation.

Yael: [00:24:23] Right, right. Which doesn't mean that he won't be upset or, or even that he won't have some sort of a strong behavioral response, but it somehow becomes a little less sticky when, when we can join. It's not always easy to do it. And we will talk a little bit about that in terms of the parental part of the equation and in sort of what kinds of responses get triggered in us because it can be very triggering, but.

As you're alluding to, and you talk a lot about in your book, there's these sort of, these two kinds of sides of like, do we love them and just give in or do we set limits firmly? And what you're saying is it's a combination. It's a combination. And the combination might change based on, you know, the circumstances and where you're at and where they're at. I'll link listeners to your recent psychology today blog post, which talks a lot about sort of this idea of giving in and how we can become more flexible about it. But I wonder if you can actually talk a little bit more about this idea of what to do in those two simple words, love and limits, cause you're sort of alluding to that, but I wonder if you could even bring it to life more.

Dr. Schrag Herschberg: [00:25:28] Absolutely. So it's a, it's an important part of a book and important part of my work with parents because we get so bogged down in so many details as parents. And I say, I have two young boys, I don't think I've said yet, but, um, Henry will be fixed in March and Zeke will be four at the end of the month, although he's very confused because his birthday is December 24th.

And so we threw him a birthday party this past weekend. And so now he has like no idea.

Yael: [00:25:55] So you were writing this book right? In the throws of having

young children, and just for all the listeners out there, it's great because you use a lot of really wonderful personal examples in very respectful, loving ways. But, but this is, this is not just something you teach. This is something you live and you don't, with all your wisdom, avoid the tantrums.

But you. Skillfully when you can write in realistic ways, respond to them. And I love a lot of the examples of the personal examples that you give

Dr. Schrag Herschberg: [00:26:22] Thank you. Yeah, no, my goal was to write it. From the perspective of a mom and the, and a psychologist, that there was a lot written by each of those people and not enough written from the voices of both because both are so valid. Um, certainly can come together. Um, but so yes, I have, I have two young boys and I know, therefore personally, and also because I do this professionally, just how many.

Things that are to read about parenting and do this and don't do that. And you have to get it exactly right. And there's this formula and you can mess up your kids so easily. And we just get bogged down in the anxiety surrounding that. And so one of the things that I focus on in the book is that there's really the, the research that has gotten the most traction over the years and for which there's the most empirical support is quite simple, which is that kids thrive when parents provide high levels of love. And high levels of limits that kids need both.

And of course there's some nuances in there and you can look up the data and cultural and ethnic and dah, dah, dah, dah, dah. However, it's really quite, quite strong across most, um, groups that you can think of that kids do well when they're given. Limits in terms of not just rules, but structures, routines, a way that makes their world kind of predictable and their role in it.

Predictable. I think of limits as a, as a container or offense, and kids are supposed to push up against it and see if it bends, and occasionally it bends, but it certainly doesn't break. Um, and love, which is not just, you know, Oh, I love my kids because most of us can say that, but really showing our kids that we love them so that they feel loved.

So yes, I'm going to have another conversation about PJ masks, even though it's the last thing in the world I want to talk about because it will help my child feel like I really love his perspective and what he wants to talk about, that sort of a thing. And if you keep both of those high. Usually things go as smooth as they possibly can.

When you're raising small humans and when things start to go awry, if it feels like you've just had a couple mornings in a row or your house just feels more stressful than usual or whatever it is. One thing to look at first is how are we doing with Levin? Lemon. And do we have to tweak one? You know, are we, are we a little bit higher on the kind of scolding and we need to up the connectedness, okay, maybe we do a movie pizza night tonight, or have we gotten a little bit lax with bedtime?

And so we have to come back down on what time is bed? You know? So really just looking at that as a nice lens, I think for parents who are getting ambushed by granular advice, to think in big picture ways that can be really beneficial for families.

Yael: [00:29:14] for me, one of the things that came up as I was reading your book is that I think limits are a little bit easier to wrap your head around in terms

of, you know, like setting the bedtime routine or creating rules about what's permissible and what's not. And in terms of, you know. I don't know. Interactions between siblings.

Love, I think is a little bit harder to wrap your head around because as you're saying, like we all think to ourselves, of course I love my children, but. When we're in the throws of like a period where your kid is tantruming all the time or, or when you're in the middle of a tantrum, it's hard to feel that and you give some really nice tips for not only what to say and do, but also how to sort of reconnect to the feeling of loving your kid.

And I wonder if you can speak a little bit to that because I think it's really important because our kids are really sensitive. Like if we say like, honey, I love you, but we're really pissed off. They're not gonna feel very loved and, and that's not our fault. And it's sometimes there's nothing even to do about it, but I do think it's quite useful to engage some of these practices of reconnecting to your internal experience of loving your small creature even when they're being really difficult.

Dr. Schrag Herschberg: [00:30:26] Yeah, no, and that's such a great point and I love that you put in there, it's not our fault because I think that's where sometimes this conversation gets stymied, is that parents just go to this place of shame, um, when it's the most natural thing in the world. If you're two year old or three year old that's throwing tantrums all day long.

Yeah. You kiss them goodnight and maybe once they're sleeping, you can feel that love.

You've been kind of telling them no, and stop all day long. Um, and so I think we need to be less ashamed of, of what is the natural outcome of that, which is that your kid feels like you're not that into them because you're not.

And I think we, connecting to it is, is so important. And the suggestions that I give and, and, and have worked for, for clients of mine and for myself, frankly, is, you know, looking at baby pictures. Um, and that's so easy to do now just with our phones. Um, but looking at baby pictures, um, remembering specific moments, like, you know, holding them right when they're born, or a particular birthday party, when, you know, they looked at you smiling and you just felt your heart melt.

You know, just really, and you're not doing that while you're. Doing 25 other things and try and return email. You're actually really pausing and remembering that, um, because it takes a conscious effort to make our brains go there as opposed to, you know, Oh my goodness, you should've seen my kid in target today.

Um. Especially when, when the culture now, just to get back to the social media thing, not that I want to get too convoluted, but it is so much about kind of let's complain about our kids to feel community and theirs do that. And so it's, it's somehow less quote unquote acceptable to say, let me tell you how much I love my kid today.

Um, and so to make the time and the space to do that ourselves, and you'll find, I mean, it's amazing that if you, I've had families where if, if. If a mom, for example, will take 10 minutes in the evening to do that as homework for a few days, she'll

report to me that the child's behavior is improved. And it's not, I mean, I haven't done a, you know, RCT on it or anything, but it's not a coincidence.

It's just that the, the energy shifts and the patient's level and the connectedness and kids, as you said, are very sensitive and they feel that,

Yael: [00:32:48] Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. I, I love that idea of assigning that as homework. And I think it's a wonderful assignment that we can each give to ourselves when we're in a particularly difficult developmental phase or, and you talk about this a bit, um, if, you know, we discover that we're not a great temperamental match to our kid is sort of actively seeking these opportunities to Tap into the love that we do at our core field, but that we might not sort of be able to access moment to moment. One of the things too, sorry, go ahead.

Dr. Schrag Herschberg: [00:33:20] sorry to interrupt. I just want to interrupt because I don't want anyone listening to feel that there are parents who don't actually feel that love at their core, and that's okay too. And the good news is I'm here. You're here like. Psychologists work with this sort of thing all the time, and we don't say like, what kind of apparent are you that you don't actually feel deep love for your kid?

We say, wow, what's going on for you? And let's, and let's explore that and let's work on it. Because the way you just said it, and I think you're right for the majority of parents, absolutely that deep love is at their core. Sometimes, whether it's trauma or whatever else, particularly though I've seen in, in cases of both trauma, you know, like sometimes it, it actually doesn't feel like it's there and I don't want people to feel like that's unusual and if they can't get help.

Yael: [00:34:07] Um, I'm really glad that you, uh, made that point and I think it is an important point and it is, it's sort of I think just goes to show how, um, how inclined we are as a culture to just. I don't know, be really presumptive about the way that parents should and do feel about their kids. And the reality is there's a lot of nuance and there's a lot of complexity, and most of the time it's normal. But in other words, like we don't need to shame ourselves for feeling. Downright pissed off or feeling a lack of love or feeling totally bored or disinterested in the things that our kids are interested in or, um, you know, annoyed with them a lot of the time, like it is okay. And the more that we can normalize our own experience, but then also figure out like, where do we want to go from here?

It just gives us a lot more to work with. Um, and one of the stories that I was. You're going to share is that all three of my boys have things that they're interested in and I'm just not interested in. And you know, initially a. Would feel that I should get interested. Like I should learn to love baseball and I should learn to be really into doing mental arithmetic.

And my youngest is obsessed with superheroes, and I just really don't enjoy reading those stories, which he insist on reading constantly. And I think for me to kind of work, that helps me tap back into the love that I feel for them when they're pushing me to do something that I don't really want to do is both to run.

Remember, you know, the positive experiences from our history, but also to create more positive experiences. Ones that I am into and that they can be into is to sort of find where the overlap is as opposed to beat myself into submission or beat them into submission metaphorically. Um, to try to find something to try to push for us to like the same things instead to just be more open and say, you

know, it's okay.

We don't like those things. Jointly, but Hey, we both like ice cream, for example, and to create positive shared experiences around that.

Dr. Schrag Herschberg: [00:36:10] And I think that comes up all the time because parents, you know, when kids come home from school, whatever their, you know, whether they're three or nine or 12 how was school? What'd you do today? And that's not what kids want to talk about. And you know, and then we feel like bored or not connected or whatever, but we haven't helped create a conversation.

And one of the things that kids love and parents always are amazed when I say this, and then the role that it works, they love to hear about us. So you can start a conversation when you're talking to come from school. Hey, can I tell you this really funny thing that happened at work today? You know, my boss came in and did it, you know, and your kid, I promise we'll put down his backpack and actually want to listen.

We're not talking about the teenagers who are like, you know, go away, mom.

And similarly, you know, when I talk about places that places that are highly likely that tantrums occur. So say a supermarket and keeping your child engaged is one way to potentially prevent tantrums and keeping them engaged as not asking them questions that they don't want to answer.

It's not an interview, you know? And so I think you're right. You create. You, you can take an active role, I guess is sort of the heading for this and, and in creating kind of the conversations all the way up to the relationship that you want with your kids.

Yael: [00:37:22] that really gets to the point that we're an active participant in this relationship. That a relationship between parent and child is not only about the child, it's also about the parent, that we're one half of that relationship. And I think that really gets overlooked a lot when we talk about parenting, that we tend to really focus on where our children are at, what they need, and we forget that.

There are things happening for us both emotionally and cognitively, and you know, in terms of how we are connected in, can you talk a lot about the power of the magical mindful pause and sort of using that as an opportunity to kind of check in with yourself. And I wonder if you could talk about why that is so

Yael Toddler Tantrum: [00:38:02] important.

Dr. Schrag Herschberg: [00:38:05] Yeah. I mean, I think it's actually a great question because it goes exactly back to what we were talking about before. The reason that that's important is because there's no right answer. The reason it's important to pause is because when your child is having a tantrum where you feel like a tantrum might be coming down the pipe, there's no, there's no like, Oh, if I think hard enough, it'll occur to me what the right thing to do is here.

I'm going to give in, or I'm not going to give in, or I'm going, if you pause and you just check in with yourself and think about kind of what's happening with my kid right now, what's happening with me right now, then you can come up with . What you want to do in a much more authentic and intuitive way. I mean, I think, I give the example in the book of when we were, um.

In a on a trip with extended family up in our house in Maine where, you know, my uncles are there and my brother and cousins and it's just a ton of people. And Henry at one point asked if he could have M and ms for dinner, I think like literally for dinner and nothing else. And. Obviously I said no, and he lost his mind, and the question was so uncharacteristic of him.

And then he went right to a tantrum and I, and I really was able to pause and say, this is just about like being way overwhelmed in this week. This is, I'm not going to go for the M and M's and then what? I'm going to take him outside, which I did. And we sat on the lawn and we cuddled and you know, and it was just, and it was because I paused and sort of tuned out the noise around me.

It was like, what's happening for my little kid and his little kid brain right.

The other piece to remember there is that you're always collecting data because parents will say, because we hear these types of formulas all the time, they'll say, well then, aren't you reinforcing it? Isn't he going to learn that when he throws a tantrum about having candy for dinner, he gets to cuddle with mom sure.

If that happens every day for two weeks. And if it starts to happen, I can then change course like none of this is written in stone. The thing that you choose to do in one moment is the thing that's going to dictate this interaction forever. And I think part of the pause is taking that pressure off of ourselves and tuning into the specific moment and the specific interaction and choosing intentionally and in an authentic way.

What makes the most sense here and now.

Yael: [00:40:21] Right? It really gets to this concept of psychological flexibility that I swear I talk about on every single episode I do, which is, you know, the, the ability to persist or DCIS in a behavior. Given your circumstances, given your values, and given what you determine makes the most sense. And we can only be psychologically flexible.

If we take that pause and check in on what our circumstances are on which value we need to prioritize and on what is going to make the most sense. And I think that is such, that is so well said because inherent in this definition of psychological flexibility is that there's not a formula and we're not going to do the same thing every single time because that would be inflexible.

We do need to be able to move with the circumstances with where our toddlers at with where we're at. I also wanted to just go a little bit deeper into the part that might be happening for us, right? Because you talk a lot in your book about buttons that get pushed for parents and how our own histories can sometimes play into it.

And if we're so wholly focused on what's going on with our toddler, sometimes we miss out on valuable information about what's happening for us and how we might, as a result, play into the interaction. And maybe even. Totally subconsciously play into creating fodder for more tantrums or more intense tantrums on our toddler's part, which again, doesn't make it our fault, but that awareness can help us be empowered to make better choices for ourselves and for our kids.

Dr. Schrag Herschberg: [00:41:54] A hundred percent a hundred percent

Yael: [00:41:57] So what are, yeah, yeah, yeah. So I guess, and yeah. I really

liked the chapter where you talk about like what can be going on for parents, and I don't know if there's some sort of, for you, some highlights as to what might be useful for people to think about. Just, you know, common things that come up in the work that you do with parents.

Dr. Schrag Herschberg: [00:42:15] I mean, I think the one that's on my mind right now, um, which I also wrote a blog post about, but it's the season. It's a season of presence. P, R E S. E N. T. S. Of giving gifts and getting gifts. And so it's a season where parents I think are really tuned into how grateful their kids are. And for toddlers, it's often how ungrateful their kids are.

And it taps into a lot of our own, um, the way we were raised in terms of our own, um, sort of. Financial background potentially, but also fear that our kids are going to be spoiled. Um, dealing with issues of privilege. I mean, it is so loaded when your child gets a present and then says, are there any more presence.

And parents will go nuts. Understandably. I mean, I, you know, it's like I feel it's like a gut punch in your stomach and you look at who heard and how should, and meanwhile your child is doing what your child is developmentally, developmentally capable of doing, which is saying, wow, that was really great. I love getting new things.

I wonder if

that was a good time. I love the little paper crinkled. I love the way looking at me.

We, we pile on sort of, again, these all these ideas that we have and we should have of gratitude and privilege and you know, and. And we end up responding in a way that's much more about that. Um, and then our kids are sort of like, Whoa, who are you?

And what happened to my mom? Like, you know, and, and then your kids get dysregulated. And when kids are dysregulated, they start acting out. And that's when they start whipping the. The wrapping paper and crying, which then reinforces your belief that they are ungrateful and terrible, and we end up in these really awful cycles.

And I think, again, I could talk about this issue and I do in the book around a gazillion different things, but given that it's December 11 is that what we are 10 I don't even know. Certainly that's the one that comes to mind because it's, it's just starting to happen all over them.

Yael: [00:44:20] Yeah. As a offshoot of that, I think one of the buttons that often gets pushed that I have noticed often gets pushed for me is just when I'm feeling underappreciated, which of course is, is what kids do, right? Because they are egocentric and their job is not to take care of me and to make me feel validated and appreciated at nauseum.

And so they don't, and I can use that as an opportunity to teach them more about expressing appreciation and, and, you know, experiencing gratitude. But I need to, in that mindful pause, separate out what is happening for me versus what are the lessons that I'm trying to impart to them. And when I don't, that's when I. Find myself feeding into whatever the cycle is between the two of us and the emotional outbursts that they're going to have. And, but when I can take the

pause, I can sort of take the intensity down a notch for myself and be more helpful.

Dr. Schrag Herschberg: [00:45:18] Yeah. And I think, I think the, um. The positive like key there. And so is the timing because in that moment is not when you're going to do a teaching. You know, things like gratitude, things like expressing appreciation. Those are, those are kind of big picture values that we need to infiltrate across kind of our family lives and not necessarily things that we can hammer in a specific moment when our child really wants us to do something and we're not feeling appreciated.

Yael: [00:45:44] Yeah. Or when they're in a meltdown or when you're in a meltdown

Dr. Schrag Herschberg: [00:45:46] right. I've taken to my new line is, um, I say, I say, Oh, are you mistaking me for an octopus? Again,

always when I'm doing something and the I'm, I'm completely in the middle of doing something. Potentially even for one of my kids. And then the other kid is like, mommy, I asked you for more water or mommy, you said you were gonna you know, come and poop with me as the case may be. You know? And so I'll say, cause all I want to say is like, does it look like you people, you know? And, and instead I've been taking a deep breath and saying like, Oh, mistaking me for an octopus again, cause I only have two hands, you know? And then they sort of laugh. I'm finding little things like that to just diffuse. Some of that can be helpful. .

Yael: [00:46:33] So let's talk a little bit more about strategies for the heat of the moment. And we've talked a little bit about, um, some of the daily habits. I think that I didn't, um, have a chance to, neither of us said this explicitly, but, you know, common causes, you know, across the board for tantrums are fatigue, hunger, end of a pleasurable experience, like dessert, wanting something that they can't have.

Um, and, and knowing those common causes and knowing that they're. Brain biology is just set up to be impulsive and emotional and rigid and seeking autonomy. There are things that we can do to structure our lives to reduce the frequency or intensity of tantrums, but when they're going to happen, when our kid is emotional, what are ways that we can interrupt it?

I mean, you gave a great example there of diffusing the situation with some humor. Um, what are some other tips that you find you found to be really useful for yourself or for your clients?

Dr. Schrag Herschberg: [00:47:27] Yeah, I mean, I think we mentioned one before with the ice cream and example of kind of joining with them in the fantasy of it. Um, my little one the other day was, you know, we were on his way to preschool and it was like eight 30 in the morning and he started screaming for a snack. We had just had breakfast.

Um. And we were in the car and I said, you know, I don't, I don't want a snack. What I want is for, uh, what did I say? What I want is for a chocolate cake to just miraculously come down from the ceiling of the car with a fork that could automatically feed me while I was driving. You know? And then he paused, and this is a true story.

And he said. Well, I want the same thing, but I want mine to come from our space,

you know? So just I think that can be incredibly useful is just taking whatever they're demanding and bringing it to this kind of playful, fantastical place.

Yael: [00:48:20] It's almost like improv. It's like you say, you'd say yes and you take it to the next level.

Dr. Schrag Herschberg: [00:48:25] Yeah. Right, exactly. And kids will sometimes, I mean, and none of these tools, I should just say, none of them are surefire every time for every kid and every circumstances. It's just stuff that sometimes works for some kids. And so, you know, to try it. Um, so I think that gets at the empathy, the playfulness, the humor, the distraction I think can certainly work.

Um, I would caution against doing it. Um. Without any kind of empathy, you know? So it's not like, Oh, I feel, you know, mad, Oh, here's something sparkly. You know, it's at least one comment of empathizing, but then, sure, if there's a fire engine going by, great. Get, you know, get the kids' attention on that attention is definitely something to play around with.

Um. I think people talk a lot about ignoring tantrums, and I think depending on the circumstance, and this is a potentially a larger conversation, but that can be useful as a very direct behavioral consequence. However, there's a way to do it kindly, right? So you're having a really hard time. I'm trying to help you and you are not in the mood for my health, so I'm going to stand over here and I'm going to do something else.

I'm going to. You know, return a few emails, whatever, and you, I know your body knows how to calm down and you come find me when you're ready. That's very different from, you know what? I'm not, I'm not doing this anymore. I know I'm leaving. You know, I'm not talking to you when you're like that, you know, which adds this level of interpersonal conflict and shame, which then I guarantee escalates.

Yael: [00:49:51] You talk a bit in your book about how timeouts, and I think this is kind of what you're getting at, can be misunderstood and misapplied. And I, and I do think that that's a really important point that you're making and one that I hadn't thought about in quite that way. Um, but that if we use a timeout is a way to.

Uh, be punitive and shaming that it ends up undercutting itself. It becomes less useful in the long run. But there are ways to remove the reinforcement that are empathic and, and loving, but that have that limit setting in that sort of removal of the reinforcer. Um, but I really appreciated your entry into that discussion about like, how do we understand timeouts, but let's get more nuanced in what's useful and what's not.

Dr. Schrag Herschberg: [00:50:38] Yeah. Well, because I think there's this vast debate that's based on zero science about like timeouts are great. Timeouts are horrible. I know it's a great time, and actually there's a lot of research reporting timeout when it is used in an appropriate way. You know, what you've just described for specific things, and there's a lot of.

And there's no research kind of supporting this idea of time in which a lot of

people are talking about. However healthy homes, our one giant time in such that timeouts are a contrast to that. If you're not living in a time in. You know, I mean, there's, we could have a whole episode on timeout, but I think the West has been very misunderstood.

Um, it's not an evil thing to do to a kid, and there's ways that parents do it really, really in a misguided way that forgetting about whether we think it's right or wrong, it's just definitively not gonna work. And it's never going to work for a tantrum. Because if we go back to the original definition of a tantrum as an expression of emotion, that kids are not capable in that moment of expressing another way.

We're then punishing them for that, and that's something it's like punishing that person in my audience for not speaking Japanese.

Yael: [00:51:52] Right? We're punishing them for something that is natural and human, and that needs to be nurtured instead of, you know, responded to in a punitive way. Well, especially if we're talking about trying to be more effective. Um, so. I wanted to end with just a personal example and I was just curious what kind of advice you would give to this.

So recently, I, um, my older two kids who are in elementary school had a music festival right before Thanksgiving and I brought my three year old, but I had worked before. And so. It was like a crazy morning. I schlepped them all to to daycare and to school. I raced to work. Then I raced to get my little one so that we could make it back together and I, because I'm a working parent, didn't have everything perfectly planned and I didn't bring snacks and water.

Because I was rushing from here to there before I got my little list to bring him to the music festival. We're in the middle of the music festival, like the entire elementary school is there. All the parents were like right in the middle of the crowd and he turns and you know, my kids are at the very beginning and at the very end, cause I've got a first grader and a fourth grader of the show and my three year old turns to me and says, mommy, I need a snack.

I'm very hungry. And Oh my God, I don't have a snack. And he starts losing it, like in the middle of the crowd. And I say, okay, we're going to leave. And he starts losing it more. So I say, okay, we're going to stay. But he's kind of at that medium level of losing it. And I'm just curious from a practical standpoint, what, what would I want?

I can tell you what I did, but I'm curious what you would have recommended.

Dr. Schrag Herschberg: [00:53:28] Yeah. And there's various preventive, I mean, and this is where the like,

Yael: [00:53:32] Yeah, I didn't prevent it. Well, that's for sure. And sometimes we don't. Sometimes we can't. Sometimes life happens.

Dr. Schrag Herschberg: [00:53:40] And I have, I told Mike, my kids said, did you, do you have snacks on our way to an appointment? I said, yes, I do. And then they asked me for the snacks and I was wrong. We didn't actually have.

Yael: [00:53:49] Oh, that's happened to me too.

Dr. Schrag Herschberg: [00:53:53] I think part of it is putting ourselves in their shoes, like, yeah, that that's a big buck, not to have a snack during the whole music festival, especially when you're the kind of mom, we usually had snacks, so the first thing I would do is just totally apologized, you know, to say, you know,

to say like, because again, sometimes tantrums can be about.

Not feeling heard. So it's like, I get, you are so hungry, you want a snack so badly. And I mass always bring snacks and I didn't bring this single snack this time, you know? So like really getting in their language that, you know, maybe giving a hug maybe, and then I might go with distraction and a little bit of, um, Hey, let me think.

Yeah. Down here, let's, let's play, let's strategize. Let's plan. It's going to be teen, mommy and Michael, and we're going to strategize and plan for how we're going to get ourselves a snack, you know, and like re like make it playful, make it, and then I might figure out out to go get a snack if, again, in this very specific circumstance, you had someone at the beginning and someone at the end and potentially did have time to spare.

There's no right answer. I don't know what you did, but whatever you did was right, because here you are, not the tail.

Yael: [00:55:05] I lived to tell the tale. What I did was I, I just, I mean, I tried to empathize. He wasn't having it. He just wanted his snack and we're in the middle and it didn't make, it was going to take too long to leave, so I literally just . Kind of sat through it. And what I did too in terms of checking in with myself is I noticed how embarrassed I was cause I figured all the other parents were looking at me and judging my parenting.

And then I thought, you know what? If this was somebody else, I would probably just say poor mom. That stinks because we've all been there. And if they are judging me, then you know there isn't much. Going to do about it because I just have to work on getting through this next little period of time. And then we got out and we got a snack and everything was fine.

And, and it was sort of one of those moments where I was able to recognize, you know, that was tough and hopefully I'll be more playful next time. And, you know, life happens.

Dr. Schrag Herschberg: [00:56:05] And you tolerated the distress, which is, and we model that for our kids. Like you, you modeled exactly what we're trying to teach kids with tantrums. Like, look, this is hard. I'm having big feelings. And I'm tolerating them. And I think, you know, that's a key lesson. I also think that, um, recognizing your own embarrassment is key because people ask all the time about tantrums in public.

And I think the number one thing that happens, which it doesn't sound like happened for you, is that we. We rupture our connection with our kids by trying to connect with the bystanders. You know, you start rolling your eyes at other people as if to say like, Oh, my kid's being such a pain. I'm sorry, whatever.

And our kid is like, okay, wait, why are you connecting with that random lady you've never seen before? I'm having a hard time. And it sounds like you were able to stay connected to him while. Kind of recognizing that that was a potential trigger for you. And then the last thing I'd say, especially if we're ending, cause I just feel like with Parenthood it's so important.

And this is a lesson to myself as well. Like it's also okay to look around at other parents and say like, Hey, I know this is a really weird request, but by any chance, does anybody, you know, we're all in this together. You know, I have a three year old and I guarantee you someone within like a 20 yard radius had a

bag of goldfish.

Yael: [00:57:22] No, it didn't occur to me to ask. And now that you say it, if it had been me observing another parent, I would have wanted them to ask and I wouldn't have wanted to offer it cause I wouldn't have wanted to interfere. But yeah, maybe I could've just asked somebody else for a snack.

Dr. Schrag Herschberg: [00:57:37] I just think we have to do that more actively because like again, we're all in this together and like similarly, if someone's kid is having a tantrum in public, and I've heard this from clients and I've experienced this myself, it's just so valuable when someone says like, Hey, I've been there. You're doing great.

Yael: [00:57:53] Yeah.

So thank you so much for providing all this valuable with, and I really highly recommend the tantrum survival guide for any parents of toddlers, but also parents in general, or again, if you have a partner who is prone to emotional meltdowns, it's just a really useful guide for thinking of new and creative ways to manage your own response and to manage the dynamic between you and a toddler or somebody else who's having big emotions.

Thank you so much for joining me today.

Dr. Schrag Herschberg: [00:58:26] And thank you. Yeah, Elvis was really a pleasure and um, yeah, I really enjoyed our conversation, so thank you for the opportunity.

Diana Hill: [00:58:35] Thank you for listening to Psychologists Off The Clock.

Yael Schonbrun: [00:58:38] You can find us on iTunes, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. Please help us out by writing a review on iTunes.

Jill Stoddard: [00:58:44] We'd like to thank our interns, Dr. Katharine Foley-Saldea and Dr Kati Lear.

Debbie Sorensen: [00:58:49] This podcast is for informational and entertainment purposes only and is not meant to be a substitute for mental health treatment. If you're having a mental health emergency dial 9 1 1. If you're looking for mental health treatment, please visit the resources on our webpage. We're at offtheclockpsych.com.