



THE GROWING BRAIN

Episode 12: Managing those Dreaded Tantrums

Guest: Dr. Christina Wise

Release Date: February 3, 2020

We've all been there. There's nothing worse than a poorly timed tantrum in the middle of a busy day. But in this episode, we discuss ways to manage tantrums in the moment, and even how to avoid them altogether (at least sometimes!).

Welcome to The Growing Brain, a social emotional health podcast. This podcast is produced by Momentous Institute, a nonprofit in Dallas, Texas, dedicated to social emotional health for kids, families, adults, and communities. This first season of The Growing Brain is dedicated to parents. We will explore the joys, challenges and mysteries of parenthood through the lens of social emotional health. In this series, we'll shed light on topics such as how kids' brains work and healthy discipline, all better equipping parents to grow healthy brains. I'm your host, Maureen Fernandez with Momentous Institute.

Maureen Welcome back to The Growing Brain. Today, our guest is Dr. Christina Wise. Christina is a licensed family psychologist, and she's the director of clinical research at Momentous Institute. And she is a mom to two boys, who are five and almost three. And today we are talking about a very important topic that is very prevalent for those of us with small kids. And that is tantrums. So thank you for being here, Christina.

Christina Thank you so much for having me.

Maureen And, uh, I don't, I heard... I'm sure you just caught what I said - five and almost three. So I'm certain that like the rest of us, you've seen your share of tantrums...

Christina And actually, preparing for this particular podcast, my children gave me a lot of opportunities to practice what I'm going to say today. I realized it's so much nicer when I can think of them as opportunities. So thank you for giving me that opportunity.

Maureen Perfect. I was going to say, I'm sure you've seen your share of tantrums. If you haven't, then we definitely have something to learn from you as well. So, um, we have all been there. I know I have three young kids as well, and yeah, they certainly exhibit their tantrums whenever they have something they need to convey to me. Um, so, so today I want to talk a little bit about what we can do in the moment when those tantrums bubble up, some skills we can practice. And then also some things we can do to avoid tantrums., at least sometimes. We know they're inevitable, but you know, minimizing the frequency of tantrums. So, uh, just to get us started, I want to think a little bit about

developmentally. What is a tantrum what's happening with kids when, when they show us those tantrums? Can you give us some insight on that?

Christina Of course, I love to think about tantrums in terms of the brain, and Tina Payne Bryson does such a wonderful job of talking about the upstairs versus the downstairs brain and talking about tantrums in light of upstairs and downstairs tantrums. And one of the things that Tina Payne Bryson talks about when she talks about the upstairs brain is how this is the part of the brain that allows us to do all of those wonderful things like plan and understand action, and then consequence. It also is what allows us to imagine and have appropriate decision-making. So it gives us a lot of different skills. The upstairs brain is actually in the upstairs part of our brain. So if you think about kind of the top of your head, it's primarily our prefrontal cortex and that upstairs brain is really important when we're trying to learn and navigate the world.

And unfortunately, or fortunately for parents, our upstairs brain is not fully developed until our mid twenties. So children really need a lot from us to be able to support them in navigating their world and understanding their world because our prefrontal cortex does so much to be able to give light to what we're going through.

And then our downstairs brain is from the top of our, our neck all the way to maybe right around where your nose is on your head. And it is part of our... it's our brainstem is there and our limbic system, which allows us to do three really important things. It regulates our bodily functions. So it lets us know, wait, heart, you need to breathe. I mean, heart, heart, you need to beat, and we need to breathe. Um, it also lets us know that, when we're in a dangerous situation that we need to respond, so we need to, um, fly away if we need to, you know, run away if we need to fight or if we need to freeze. And then it also allows us, um, to have strong emotions. It controls our strong emotions, like fear and anger, joy. So there's, there's good. And, and bad in there. And so, as we are talking about that downstairs brain, if you think about where tantrums are coming from, they're strong emotions and our children often don't yet have the language to be able to put to those strong emotions. And we don't necessarily have the planning, the action and consequence to be able to understand what's happening to them in the moment. And so for young children, it becomes that much more important for our ourselves as parents to show up in a way that we can support them.

And actually, I really like the way that Steve Finn talks about showing up as a parent. He's a psychologist out of Austin, Texas, and he talks about emotional development as a thimble and a saucer. And so he talks about the fact that as a toddler, emotional capacity is the size of a thimble. So it does not take much for a child to kind of pour over and need extra support. And so they are looking for us as parents or caregivers to show up as the saucer and to be a saucer is to be consistent and to be supportive, we have to continue to show up for them. And if we do, then it builds, and their emotional capacity by the time they reach elementary school, it's more like an espresso cup. So it's not quite as small as a thimble. It's a little bit bigger. Um, and we don't need to show up as often, but we still need to show up. And if we continue to show up and show what it looks like to be regulated and help them regulate, then by the time they're in middle school, then it's a coffee cup. And by the time they graduate from high school and

they're going off on their own, it's a bucket. So if you can imagine a bucket, we need to be there so much less to be there, to be the saucer.

And so if you think about tantrums and that way, absolutely teenagers have meltdowns. Um, but they're, they're less often. They're not as frequent because we have been there as the saucer consistently so that it takes a lot more to pour over a bucket compared to a thimble.

Maureen Nice. Yeah, that's great. Um, you talked about upstairs and downstairs tantrums. So I know the downstairs tantrum has started that one, that we're all thinking of, you know, the grocery store melt down or, or just, you know, the irrational, like kids, just all in their feelings and totally losing it. Um, what's an upstairs tantrum look like?

Christina Absolutely. The, sometimes it's actually really difficult to tell the difference in the moment, because as a parent, you just are like, wait, I, I see a big feeling. I don't understand what's happening, or I just want you to stop, especially if it's in that public place. The difference often is that you can actually see physical differences with kids. With my own children, when I see my, um, my little one really have a downstairs tantrum. They are breathing heavy. They're crying uncontrollably to the point where they, they actually can't verbalize what's happening for themselves, versus upstairs tantrums where you're seeing, I want that toy and I want it now, um, they're able to communicate what they want. They're doing it in a big way and those downstairs tantrums... um, another way that I like to just do a double-check, is that in the moment, if you can, provide consequence or choice. And they're able to, in that moment, take you up on those, then often I know that that's an upstairs tantrum and often what that is, is a testing of boundaries. And so you've set a limit and they didn't like that limit. And this is one way that they're communicating that they didn't like the limit and children give us so many different messages. And it's important for us to listen to the message, while also holding strong to the boundary. And so in those moments, I'm always thinking about my relationship with my child and what I want from that relationship while also holding strong to the limit. Because if I just give in, in those upstairs tantrums, Then the next time they've learned the lesson that I didn't mean for them to learn, about how to get what they want. And so sometimes it's easier to just hand them the snack in the, the shopping, a shopping checkout line versus say, no, actually we're waiting for dinner and, and take the next step. Um, and then we just give in and that one moment, and then it becomes the toy the next time. And then it becomes, yeah, so it becomes quite a pattern without us really meaning to. So that's when I think about upstairs and downstairs, I'm often thinking about in the moment, are they able to communicate with me? And physically, what are they showing me? They're showing me that it's an upstairs tantrum.

Maureen I think that's a really good distinction, because I think, um, you know, being able to identify is this just the kid wants a toy and I said, no, and they're mad at me, versus this is something the child is really having a hard time and he's not able to really work through this on his own. Um, those are, those require two different responses from us as parents. So that's a really good distinction.

Christina Absolutely. I also strongly believe that upstairs tantrums can become downstairs tantrums depending on how we respond. And so I have found myself constantly in that place of like, ooh, I did not mean to do that as my child is now really hurt because of the way I respond, especially I've discovered when I have, um, both boys fighting. And as soon as you make a determination on one person's side over another, you have a potential of, of hurting without meaning to, so I get into that place often, too.

Maureen So I think as parents, the first, when you see a tantrum, your ultimate goal is shut it down. Like I don't want to deal with the tantrum. I, I want it to end as quickly as possible. So I think that's probably all of our agenda, especially those tantrums that are large or violent or in public or, you know, anything. You're just like, I gotta get this to end as fast as possible, um, we talked about with upstairs tantrums, it's so tempting to be like, if you just be quiet, I'll give you the piece of candy so that we can move on. Um, but what are some better ways to kind of shut down the tantrums quickly, but that are constructive?

Christina Absolutely. I think that there are different approaches based on whether you're in public versus at home as well. I think the biggest part is consistency and you staying regulated. So one of the things that child-parent relationship therapy talks about is as a parent to be a thermostat and not a thermometer. And I love to, to think about that. It's a great visualization. And what that really means is if you think about a thermostat, it sits on the wall and you set it to a specific temperature and that temperature is 70 degrees or... that's what my house is because I'm always cold, but you know, it could be, you know, you set the temperature and then that's where it stays regardless of what's happening in the room, a thermometer, you can get really active and upset and that thermometer can go up, and you can cool down and breathe and the thermometer can go down. And as parents, it's really important for us to not ride the rollercoaster with our kiddo. So it's not our job to become, you know, at the exact same temperature that they are when they're getting hot and excited. It's not our job to be there with them. Our job is to stay steady, stay the course, stay the 70 degrees. And I think that, that's the first thing that I think about, especially in a public place, because it's easy to just want to, um, shut it down quickly and often that's my eyes wide. What are we doing right now?

And that is effective sometimes in the moment. Yet it doesn't, when I'm going back to that, Steve Finn's thimble versus the saucer, it doesn't necessarily teach them how to regulate themselves the next time. So every time is an opportunity for them to start learning how to regulate, and one of the best ways to do that is to first connect. And so I work really hard on sometimes just being in physical proximity with my kiddos. Sometimes they don't want to be in that moment and it's just an arm. And then sometimes it's a full hug and we're breathing together and I'm responding in that moment, letting them know what it is to breathe in through my nose, out through my mouth. So that in the moment, even though they can't regulate, I'm showing them what it looks like to regulate. This may be a crying child on my, on my shoulder. And that absolutely could be the case. It could be that my three-year-old is trying to hit me in that moment. And it's not that I'm avoiding that boundary because I'm absolutely saying in this moment, it's okay to be mad. It's not okay to hit mama. And so then his arms get hugged around him while, while we're doing this together. And so I think that

part of it is making sure to hold the boundary in the moment, but it's also making sure that you're there with them as well.

And as, as they get older, this looks different. Um, I think some of the ways that when we're out in public, it's keeping my, my voice quiet. This is sometimes, uh, singing to them. Um, even when they're like, please stop or, you know, it's also deciding at that moment that you know what, we're going to actually go outside and leave this be and my spouse is the one checking out at the grocery store, or I'm coming back later to do this. And then sometimes it's having a crying child in the shopping cart while I'm finishing, checking out. So I think that there's a balance because the one thing I always have to know is I want the relationship first and I also want to make sure not to give in to that limit or boundary and that actually ruptures the relationship for the next time because then they don't believe in my consistency and voice.

All of that to say, I also make mistakes all the time. I, I mess this up regularly as a parent and I think one of the things that I love about child-parent relationship therapy is it talks about what's most important may not be what you do, but what you do after what you did. And I think that it gives you that flexibility to know I'm going to mess up in the moment. There's going to be times when I'm going to be embarrassed or I'm going to be in public, or I'm going to say, please just stop. And I can always go back and reconnect with my kids and let them know, you know what, mommy didn't get that right this time. This is how she would have wanted to, to do this differently. What did you feel in this moment? How can we think about doing this in the future differently that is better for both of us?

Maureen *I love that. Thank you for saying that, because so often you listen to these podcasts or you read the parenting books and you do all things and you're like, ooh, I do that right sometimes, a lot of times I totally mess that up or like that's great advice, yes, but when I'm in the grocery store, my kids losing it, it's hard for me to think, okay, what did she say? Ahhh, I gotta connect. I got to do all the right things, you know? Um, so. Thank you for bringing that into the conversation that we all mess it up. And that repair is so important. And I really especially liked that the framework you just gave us of what those repair conversations look like. I think, you know, when I mess up, I think, Oh, I should apologize, but I, I've never really thought through that conversation as clearly as you just explained it.*

Christina So I think of course, actually I have one wonderful example that has happened recently. Because my sons gave me a lot of opportunity to think through and reflect on our conversation today. My five-year-old and a three-year-old were playing and as they were playing, I came in at the last moment and just saw them fighting over a toy. So I didn't know what had happened before. And I immediately was like, let's stop. And that sent my older son into meltdown and he was really, really upset and he chose to, he let me know he was mad. He's the son of a psychologist. He does let me know regularly. I am that mom. And then his next choices were not as appropriate in terms of their ways of showing me that he was angry. And when I let them know, we can absolutely be mad. I love that you're able to tell me that, and that's not an appropriate way to show me that you're mad. That's when he became very upset and ran to his room, close the door.

So I took that moment to just breathe myself. And that's part of that thermostat. You have to get yourself regulated and take the moment. And sometimes parents that I've worked with have this urgency that they have to do it right then, like they have to go. I have to have a consequence and if I don't do it this immediate second, then they're not going to understand the lesson that I'm trying to impart. And unfortunately, that urgency often ends up with a consequence that you didn't really intend or in a tone or approach that you didn't want. And so it's really important to just take the moment and give yourself that. So I will breathe and take my moment to get myself to the 70 degrees. And then I was able to walk in and I just went over to the bed and I sat next to him. And I just let him lean into me and then I hugged him and we did our breathing. He is always like, oh, mom breathing. But at this point he was not quite able to say that. And we were just breathing in and out until he got regulated. And in that moment, I had the choice of just letting it be, I could have, but it felt like he was ready to hear a conversation or ready to have a conversation. So at this point I was like, so what's going on, buddy? Like what's happening? And he let me know that he had brought a toy out to the living room and his younger brother had taken it and I came out and was like, it's no one's toy. So he was going to tell me that, and I said, that's not an inappropriate way for you to tell me. So then he didn't feel heard and understood. And so that was my time to be able to say, mom got it wrong. I came in and I made an assumption and then I didn't let you let you talk and tell me what you needed me to say. And he's like, oh yeah. And yeah, at the same point I had a boundary because he had let me know his anger in a way that was inappropriate. It wasn't okay. And so we actually then talked about, it's totally fine to be angry, but what do we do with that? When we are angry, what are some ways that, that we can be angry and not hurt other people? And so we've talked a lot about, you know, throwing toys or breaking toys is not an okay way to show that we're angry, but telling mom that we're mad and, and saying, this really stinks, absolutely is a great way of talking about us being angry. And so we were able to collaborate on what ways he may show me in the future and how he can cue me in when I'm missing the boat in a different way, um, before he becomes angry. So we talk a lot about just asking for help, um, versus just getting mad and upset, but he gave me a great opportunity to talk to you that today.

Maureen *That's a great example, and, um, I think that that conversation is perfect. It makes a lot of sense. And I wonder, you know, how often are these tantrums a result of something I've done wrong or I miss, I missed it. Um, and so that's a great example.*

I also want to, I kind of have been curious from you on developmentally, I mean, how reasonable is it to expect that a child will be able to just say I'm angry and here are the reasons why, um, and how much grace do we have when they do have those meltdowns, knowing that they're really working, I mean, it's hard for them to feel, to articulate that way.

Christina I love that question because as I was preparing for this podcast, I kept thinking about all of the caveats, out of all of the development. I mean, kids go through so much, they are going through these huge, huge milestones in terms of their physical development, being able to walk and talk and, and then school and figuring out school and emotional development is probably the trickiest. And it's also the one that kids really are so

variable. It's not like a, there's not a straight line. It's one that kind of meanders and curves. And then when you get to middle childhood and adolescence, then you get puberty and it becomes that line becomes even less linear. And I think there's a lot of adults who are still really working in this area too. I mean, emotional regulation and skills and all the time. I mean, none of us get it right all the time. So in that way, it's really unfair to think about kids responding and feeling and acting in the exact same way that adults do. And my spouse and I regularly have that conversation of are we expecting way too much? And often we are, we do those double checks where it's like, well, can't you just see that?

Maureen *Oh, wait, he's five.*

Christina He's five or three. Um, when did I, I'm barely just saw that last year. And so, yeah. You know, it's just, we, we hold each other accountable to that.

And if, if I think about tantrums as a completely normal part of a child's development, it's absolutely make sense when we have big emotions and we don't yet have the language or the understanding of what it really means to have big emotion and how to respond to it, tantrums make complete sense. And then even in older childhood and adolescence, when you think about big emotions with how much they're facing in terms of the increased complexity of what they're facing. Those big emotions make complete sense. And we're asking them to do all of that before the parts of their brain that really understand action and then consequence and planning has even been fully formed. And so it's... it's essential for us to think about, about what we are expecting of them and give a lot of grace in that. I also would say that there's with that variability, there's a lot of kiddos who have special circumstances, um, who have experienced trauma, who, um, maybe have a diagnosis of ADHD or autism spectrum disorder, sensory, sensory challenges. Um, there's so many different special circumstances. And so for each kiddo, they're going to have a different trajectory. They're going to have steps forward and steps back. And it's important to go back to that thimble and saucer. They're all going to continue to grow in that area and progress as long as we as parents show up as their saucer. And yet there's times when it's more than a parent or caregiver can manage. And that's when it's really important to consult with physicians or psychologists, um, consult with your group around you and know that you're not going through this alone. And absolutely there's often times when we need additional support.

Maureen *And thank you for saying that in sometimes tantrums are the clue that you need additional support. Sometimes the tantrums come before the diagnosis, I would imagine, sometimes you're thinking these tantrums don't seem the same frequency or duration or, um, extent as my, maybe my friend's kids. And so maybe they can lead you to sort of follow some of that.*

Christina Absolutely. If you have a kiddo whose tantrums are happening so frequently, multiple times a day, that it's impacting their ability to function in their classroom or in their daycare environment. That's a big sign. Also, if you have a kid who who's tantrums are lasting 20 to 30 minutes or more consistently, that's another big sign. There's, there's definitely things when you're looking around and you're like, this is bigger than I can manage. Definitely consult with a physician or a psychologist.

Maureen *One thing I've noticed about my kids' tantrums is there are the random ones that just seem to pop out of nowhere. And then they're the ones that are very consistent. Like they, every time this, you know, A happens, B happens and every time I have to do this, there's a tantrum. And so those ones, it can take a while before you start to notice those trends, but when you do, that's a good sign for me as a parent, like, oh, I need to, that's on me now. So I need to attend to that. Um, and you know, I have so many examples of this. One of my kids loves to eat, and if you take away her breakfast before she's finished with it, cause it's time to get up, get out the door to school, and she has a few bites left on the plate, she's going to lose it. She's just going to lose it every day. I know that. So I need to plan, you know, the right amount of time or the right amount of food for her that I know she can finish it before we go out the door. Um, or we're going to start the day with a tantrum and that's on that's now my job, she's given me enough communication that this is, this is a setup for a tantrum, and now it's on me to kind of attend to that.*

Christina I love, I love that example...

Maureen *Which I share! I'm like, I don't want my food left uneaten on my plate either.*

Um, and then they're the ones that just seem to pop out of nowhere, like I'm like, where did that come from? You know, and those ones require me again, still me, to do some extra digging. Like I wonder if they didn't get enough sleep last night, or if something else is bothering them, did something happen at school today that they haven't told me about? Um, and in my experience, it seems like if I really try, I can always find what's really happening with the tantrum, um, that there really is no such thing as just like a totally random tantrum. That's my experience. I'm curious what your thoughts are about that.

Christina I would agree, in that everything that our children do is communicating their needs. And if we, as parents think about it that way, they're always communicating something to us, even when they're not using any words at all. And I think patterns are, I love that you took the time to really think through your kiddos' patterns because sometimes it feels like it makes no sense and it came out of nowhere, but when you pull up and think about, oh, well over time, okay. Yes, this makes sense. It's around the same time in the day. Um, there's a lot of times when in that moment, it's not going to be a pattern. It's going to be something like you hurt someone's feelings. Um, they, they were hurt by their brother. We recently had, um, one where my older son had asked my younger son if they were best friends.

Maureen *Ooh, that's juicy. That is a lot in our house. Best friend conversation....*

Christina Best friends is... that is quite the weight, I mean, you can hold that over.... And so we had a, this experience in the, the, um, little one looks at his older brother and I was like, no, and it was just this devastating moment. And as a parent, I'm just like, please just tell him that you're best friends, he wants to be best friends. And, and yet they, they both get to have their, their voice in that. And so, you know, it, it was not, we weren't there to witness this. This was all passed on through my older son, once he was able to

get back under control. Um, and in the moment, it felt like they were playing so nicely and then suddenly, the world ended, and we couldn't quite figure out why. And sometimes, you know, it's not necessarily in the moment about figuring out why, it's just showing up and getting them to a different place. And then that's where those revisiting conversations can be really important.

And in our house, part of that is we, we bring them into the conversation about what might help them. And actually, we, we just recently in the last couple of weeks got a Soothies, I don't know if you've ever heard of one of those. They are adorable. They're these stuffed animals that are weighted and then they... they have smells. You can buy one that smells like lavender. And so we got, it's an elephant, it's a weighted elephant that smells like lavender.

Maureen I want one for me.

Christina They're lovely. And, um, and you can definitely have them as an adult as well. You can actually, even like, you can heat them and cool them as well.

Maureen We're really talking, I'm gonna Google this as soon as we're done.

Christina Please do. And so one of the things we talked about, we brought this home and I introduced it to the kids. And I was like, when we have really big emotions, do you think this would help? And they were like, yeah, yes. And they, so they, they took turns, hugging their elephant and kissing the elephant. And it's not one that goes in their room. It's only for when they really have big emotions. And so we tried it out this weekend and my little one got really upset and my partner was like, do you think he would help? He was like, I think so. And so he got him and he hugs, hugs this Soothies, and he's like, he really did help a little bit. I think part of it was, if we had introduced it in the moment when the big feelings were happening, it would not have worked, but because we had introduced and figured it out together and he had collaborated on the solution, then suddenly he, he was really effective. I've never seen him stop crying so quickly because he's like, this is something that's going to help. Just like when a band-aid can suddenly help cure everything. And so I think that in those moments, if you, once you get them regulated and back down, then you can have the conversation about what happened.

And of course, my conversation with my five-year-old looks really different from my conversation with my three-year-old, the three-year-old I'm and I'm, I love that I'm just rounding up to three. He'll be three in January. And when I'm talking to him, I'm giving him potential things. And I'm like, you know, and, and maybe he endorses something that wasn't actually the case, but at least we're, we're trying to figure it out together. I wonder, did that, you know, did that hurt you? Was that physically, you know, sometimes he actually physically got hurt or he was hungry or he just wanted something or he was tired. Um, and he's able to say yes, that was it. And maybe it was, or maybe it wasn't, but now he has a different understanding of what was happening to him. And it doesn't feel so out of control because I think just for, as, as parents, it's difficult to not have any idea. I think from kids' perspective, sometimes they don't have

any idea why they got so upset and it's really helpful to have a frame of wait a second. That is maybe why I got so upset.

Unfortunately, the endorsing of that they're really tired is not one that I get an awful lot, but we know that we know that that's probably what's happening.

Maureen *No, that's really good. I hadn't really thought about that in terms of, they, they also are processing through what made them have a tantrum, so that helping them prevent it in the future too.*

Um, I am wondering about older kids and we kind of talked about this. You talked about the thimble and the cup. Um, you know, teenagers are often not the throw yourself on the floor, punch the floor, kind of variety of tantrums, but we know that teenagers have big emotions without necessarily the adult capacity to manage them. How does this sort of shift as kids get older? What do we start to see with older kids?

Christina I think that really, when we're talking about older kids and adolescents, we stop using the word tantrum and start using the word meltdown, yet they can look sometimes, you know, not that dissimilar, especially when you've got kiddos who are really having big emotions. And so, as you said, the, you know, the need for the saucer becomes less and less, yet if you think about what an older child or adolescent is facing every day, the types of issues become more and more complex. They're suddenly in a really different dynamic with their peers and it can feel all-encompassing and that's genuine for them. That feels very much, um, you know, black and white, all or nothing, in their friendships. And also if you take that and then put it with parents who are seeing that their kids' decisions that they're facing seems so much bigger with so much bigger consequences. When your three-year-old decides to have a tantrum at the store about not getting the toy, then in that moment, you're like, okay, that's an upstairs tantrum. If he doesn't get the toy, this is not a choice that's going to impact him long-term. And yet when the 16 year old is behind a wheel of a car and is choosing to have friends in the car and you're saying no friends in the car because of, of safety, those types of decisions have much, much more, um, you know, impactful consequences. And so for parents, it's much harder for them to stay the thermostat because the consequences seem so dire. And it also seems like the, the guidance that was quickly received at three doesn't seem like the 16-year-old is as receptive to that same guidance. And so I think that sometimes that parent adolescent dynamic can become that much more, um, you know, it ends up igniting meltdowns that otherwise, maybe not there when they were younger. And so actually, a couple of different clients came to mind when you asked that question. One, I had, um, a daughter and mom who came in to see me who were having huge fights over the dishes. And so there was, every night mom would ask the daughter to do the dishes and the daughter felt like that was really unfair because she had a lot of other things that she wanted to do in terms of schoolwork and things like that and that mom should just do it. And so they became, every... every night in this power struggle and they ended up yelling at each other, the daughter would melt down and would end up trying to regulate herself by herself, in her room. And then the mom would do the dishes because she was like, I am just so sick of this.

And so every night there was this pattern and it resulted in them, their relationship becoming more and more distant over time because it felt like they couldn't connect on this. And finally, you know, I talked to the mom about the importance of consistency, and I think that consistency and support is absolutely vital across all age span, but it's really important when you have an adolescent who recognizes every time you're not. And you're sending a message without meaning to, the mom didn't even realize in her pattern that she was giving in every night by doing the dishes, and the daughter found out that if she fought, she wasn't, I have to do this. And then she could go to her room and do the work she wanted to do anyway.

And so finally, we collaborated together, mom and I on a logical consequence for the daughter. She was going to not have her phone for the weekend and mom follow through. And she hadn't followed through on a consequence for quite some time. And so it was that consistency and it really only took one to two times of that for the daughter to realize, wait a second. And so then the daughter started doing the dishes. And then now there wasn't that fight. So then meltdowns went from every day to basically nothing except for around certain schoolwork. So, so much of it's about consistency.

I also had another kiddo who came to mind who was, um, a boy who the mom, every time would give a week's grounding from video games. And he would melt down every night that he didn't get to play his video games because that was the way he unwound, you know, got to unwind after homework. And by day three, mom would give in and give him back the video game player. And so we talked a lot about that in that consistency is also making sure that the consequence is one that you're willing to give. And so if you can only, you know, take two or three days of the video games, because it's just, sometimes those consequences are just as much on our ourselves as parents, as it is on the kiddo. And so, after two or three days, if that's as much as you can take, then only give two to three days is the consequence.

And so the mom started grounding in one to two day increments, and that really shifted things because suddenly the idea of, no, this is what you say is going to happen. And then this is what's going to happen and making sure to follow through on that because especially in older childhood and adolescence, when the world is kind of out of control, um, they are looking for some of that consistency and their safety that happens in that consistency. Um, whereas parents, as we talked about, you just want the meltdown to be over. So you just, and sometimes in those moments you don't realize that you're making it harder on yourself tomorrow.

Maureen I love both of those examples are so good. And I especially love that one about the dishwasher. I mean, if you think about it, if you say the expectation is that you do the dishes every night, that's just the expectation. And then you don't have to get in those, you don't have to set yourself up for those fights every night, you know, um, way easier said than done, definitely. So totally can relate to both of those parents of having done it totally wrong. Um, but just really loved both those examples and the importance of sort of clear guidance, clear expectations. And then following through when the expectations are broken versus kind of trying to figure it out on the fly, like what's the expectation today and when...

- Christina Exactly. And I think that's why, remember I had talked about earlier, about giving yourself the time and you don't have to create consequence right then in the moment, like, I think that, um, we've actually joked sometimes that, you know, people as parents, we think of our kids, like potty training for dogs. In the moment for dogs, like, you have to give a consequence, but...
- Maureen *That's what I thought of when you said that, I was like, oh, just like with dogs, you have to do it right away.*
- Christina And children are not, we, they are complex wonderful beings and they can, they can wait and, and have you wait and think about what the reasonable consequence is. They can also be part of that consequence, um, development, once they're in a place in terms of their emotional regulation, that they can have that conversation. So it can take that onus off of you. And you know, this is, this is different. You don't have to have an immediate consequence, today this second.
- Maureen *I love that. That is really helping me because I think consequences are such a challenge and I'm so guilty, I could fill this whole podcast with times I've done inappropriate consequences or done them too quickly without thinking through the consequences of my consequences. And, um, so I really love that thinking. So that's really helpful...*
- Christina I would like to point out that I'm in the same boat. There's so many times my partner looks at me and he's like, you're supposed to know better. I'm like, I know.
- Maureen *You're like, I've literally given other people advice on this and now I'm doing it this way.*
- So we've talked a lot about responding to tantrums. And just now we're talking some about avoiding tantrums by setting clear expectations. Do you have any other tips on avoiding tantrums in the first place?*
- Christina Of course, I think this is the most important because it's wonderful if it's not even something that comes up because you've laid the groundwork and we absolutely don't get this right all the time. And yet there are things that we can do. I love the work that you've already done with your children. I think those are the, uh, a lot of the work of parents is figuring out how to, how to not put a child in an experience that stresses them out. So you know that your, your daughter wants to have all of her food. So you're going to only give her the food that she's going to eat. Um, if I have knowledge that every weekend, if my child doesn't get a nap that this is going to result in a tantrum. If we try and go out later in the day, then one of the best things to do is either make sure that he has a nap or not put them in a place of going out if he didn't get one. And obviously there's going to be times we can't do that, but I do think that that's important to think about the patterns and try and reduce them, yet the one part that global, if you really pull up and think about what is the most impactful for supporting that, not having tantrums or supporting, having your child feel more, you know, um, regulated and having a consistent, safe environment is thinking about parenting as an arm around your child and a nudge, a gentle nudge in the side.

And when I think about that, I think about all of our expectations and limits need to be in context of that strong, supportive, loving relationship, because it is felt so differently by your children, understood so differently by your children if they believe that you love and care about them, if they believe that those expectations and limits are coming from their best interest.

And yet you also need the nudge in the side because it's our job to make sure that they feel safe and have boundaries. And so if you just worry about the arm around and you're constantly caring, supporting, and saying how wonderful things are going, you're missing out on providing them that safety and structure, which allow for your, you know, child, who's a toddler and has the thimble to get to the espresso cup, to get to the coffee cup, to get to the bucket.

And we often talk in parenting classes, if you think about parenting as a triangle, we often as parents actually make the triangle the wrong side. Because what happens is if you think of a triangle with the long side on the bottom, so that there's a lot of support and structure, there's a really solid base. That is how we should really be going in terms of thinking about parenting, we should provide a ton of structure and support and limited choice in early childhood. So that by the time they leave us, that we're giving them a lot of, of, um, autonomy and that we know and can trust their decisions because they have had so much opportunity to show us that they can make good decisions. So by the time they're leaving us at 18, that they are in a place of feeling confident and supported and ready to leave the world. They're at that peak. Yeah, what happens a lot is that parents actually inverse it and they put the strong foundation up at the top when they're 18, because it feels like for parents at 18 is when all of the decisions become so much more impactful and have so much bigger consequences. And so we give kids who are toddlers at that peak, that little, little point. So we give them less and less choice and structure and support, and we're like, they're fine. They can just go and, and then as they get older and older, we're like, oh no, no, wait a second. And we start adding more and more structure so that by the time that they leave us, um, they don't necessarily have that confidence because they haven't gotten to try it, test it. They haven't gotten us saying, wow, that was a good decision. Or ooh, maybe try a different choice here. And so when they are 18 and they're actually really wanting to reach that peak, they're now feeling less grounded rather than more grounded. And so it's really important as parents to have all of this structure and support, which the structure is that nudge in the side and the support is the arm around. So that as they're dealing with the, you know, the big, um, developmental milestones that they have to deal with as they're growing up, especially with emotional regulation and development, that they feel like we're there, that we're a safe support system for them, but that we are going to hold strong to our boundaries and our limits. And so we just need to know when it is that we need to intervene, whether it's right then and there in the moment, because it's an upstairs tantrum and they are ready and able to have those conversations or if it's a downstairs tantrum and we need to just be there and be the arm around and then come back and be the nudge a little bit later.

Maureen I love that. And while you were talking, it made me think, we talked about sort of avoiding tantrums, but we don't want to avoid them to the extent that we're minimizing their opportunities to practice those skills. And I know I, you know, one way

we do this in my house is like in when we're playing board games, And if there's a winner and everyone else loses. And the, you know, sometimes the kid who loses kind of has a little meltdown, like I can't believe I didn't win. And we use those as opportunities to say, yeah, somebody wins and somebody loses. That's what makes it fun, if you won every time it wouldn't be fun. And, um, you know, we talk about how to manage that big feeling. Like I'm so upset that I lost, but you don't get to just push all the pieces off the table and go to your room and slam the door. You know, we work through those small opportunities for conflict cause you don't want to just take away every potential opportunity for tantrum because those, those managing those big feelings is part of that skill development that you're talking about.

Christina I love that. I think that it's true. This podcast gave me an opportunity to see all of our tantrums that way, but I, I do think that that's so important in terms of how as parents we show up and think about and reflect on our children's experiences. If it's like oh, here's just another one, versus it gives you an opportunity for connection. It gives you an opportunity to model what it looks like to regulate in big moments, especially in those public ones where it could feel really embarrassing. Um, you get to have the opportunity to show them what it looks like to breathe yourself, to regulate yourself. Whenever you mess up, you're going to have those moments - that gives them an opportunity to see what it looks like to take responsibility. And we see that all the time at home for us is when we can take responsibility, then our kids are so much more willing to as well, because we aren't perfect. Um, and I think that's so important for, for parents to realize is that we're not going to get this right, but it's not what you do in the moment, it's what you do after that moment that's the most important. And, and we actually talk about in therapy regularly that a lot of times our relationships are like tree branches. And if you think of a tree branch, if it breaks, you have a rupture in your relationship, and there's a little bit of a break and it actually heals over stronger than what it once was. You have those moments where you make a mistake as a parent and you get the opportunity to make your relationship even stronger. And if you think about it that way, then suddenly the way that you approach your kiddo during those times, it looks different than feeling like you've got to get it right all the time and getting mad at yourself.

Maureen Well, thank you so much. This has been really helpful for me, giving me a lot to think about I'm sure just like you all have plenty of opportunities to practice your skills. Maybe if I'm lucky, as soon as tonight, we'll get some more opportunities to practice. So thank you so much for being here.

Christina Thank you so much for having me.

So this has been our final episode of season one of The Growing Brain. I really hope you've enjoyed listening to these 12 episodes on some of the most important parenting topics. We're going to take a short break while we prepare Season Two of the podcast, and we'll be back soon with another season, we're diving even deeper into some of the biggest challenges that parents face.

So coming up in season two, we're addressing issues such as talking to your kids about divorce, managing anxiety, ADHD, dating relationships, and so much more. So we hope you'll join us for these conversations. Be sure that you are subscribed so that you can get notified as soon as we release Season Two.

And lastly, I would really love to hear from you. I've had some great conversations with people who listened to the podcast and I've tried some of the strategies or shifted their thinking. And I love hearing that. So if you have feedback for me, or especially if you have ideas for topics that you want us to cover, please let me know. What parenting questions do you have and what do you hope that we can talk about? I would love your feedback. You can email me at podcast@momentousinstitute.org, and I monitor this account. So if you send anything there, I will read it and I will get back to you. Please let me know what you want us to cover.

Thank you so much for listening to season one of The Growing Brain and just a reminder that you can find even more of our content related to social emotional health, including articles, videos, book reviews, and tons more at momentousinstitute.org/blog. Thank you.