



Reilly and Associates

Behavioral Consultation and In Home Parent Support

5 things to do when you are at your wit's end

There are a lot of legitimate reasons why you might find yourself at your wit's end, boxed in a corner, slipping into a downward spiral with your child. Let me name a couple reasons that have been true for me:

1. It's been a long day and I am tired and grumpy.
2. No matter how many times I tell Matthew to stop making loud noises, he makes another loud noise.
3. Matthew is tired and grumpy and looking for a fight.
4. I've tried everything and nothing works.
5. Matthew knows better and he does it anyway.
6. Matthew does things that no other child in the world would do. I must be a bad mother.
7. What worked yesterday doesn't work today.
8. It doesn't really matter why you are ready to tear your hair out. If you have reached that point, you
9. need to have some strategies at your fingertips or the stress will take a toll on you. Actually, you have
10. to have several interventions at the ready because the first idea might not work the way you want it to work.

With that in mind, here are five ideas that I've used and that I've taught other parents to use that have had some success:

IDEA #1 – PLAY A GAME: This game needs to be a game that you and your child have played before and had fun playing. When Matthew was a little, little boy, we played The Directions Game. This is how it worked: One person is the Leader. The Leader gives the first player a direction she can easily complete. When the player completes the direction, the Leader praises the player and gives the player a reinforcer. The Leader then gives the second player a direction. When player 2 completes the direction, the Leader praises the player and gives the player a reinforcer.

Here is a sample of a game: Carol is the mom. She has a 3-year-old boy, Sam, who is as cute as a button. Sam is developmentally delayed and does not speak. Her daughter, Claire, is a typical 13-year-old. Carol, Sam and Claire are sitting on the floor of the living room.

Carol: Sam, stand up and put your hands on your head.

(Sam stands up and puts his hands on his head. Carol and Claire cheer.)

Carol: Good job, Sam. (Carol gives Sam a Smartie – a very small candy – as a reinforcer.)

Carol: Claire, your turn. Stand up, do 5 jumping jacks, turn around twice and sit down.

(Claire stands, does the jumping jacks, turns around and sits down. Carol cheers. Sam claps his hands.)

Carol: Nicely done, Claire. Here's a Frito. Now it's your turn again, Sam.

You get the idea.



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But this game won't work for a typical kid or an older kid or a more skilled kid. Other games to consider are checkers, Gin Rummy, Hang Man, and Boggle. The main points to remember is that it should be a game that is short in durations (so Risk or Sorry or Monopoly doesn't really work). It has to be a game that is well within the skill level of your child. And it has to be fun.

The purpose of the game is to change the tone of the household completely, to step away from whatever is going on and for both of you to take a breather. It is a structured activity that gives you time to re-group. And it has been fun in the past.

IDEA #2 – WRITE A PLAN: Sit down with your child and make a plan. Part of the plan should be demanding and part should be easy-breezy for the child. Sometimes Matthew would pester me and pester me for something that I knew I would eventually do, but I couldn't or wouldn't do it right then. Matthew and I would sit and I'd write PLAN FOR SATURDAY at the top of the sheet. Then we would list activities on the plan: clean the room, take a shower, walk around the block, put a puzzle together, go to Wal-Mart and buy a new watch. Having a concrete plan in front of us helped us both focus and stay on track. You don't need to do things in order. You don't even need to do everything on the plan. But it helps both you and your child see the structure to the day.

This only works if your child has some language. And it only works if there is some reinforcer on the list that you are willing to deliver and the child is willing to work for. I'm frequently willing to go to Wal-Mart to buy a \$15 watch. I'm never willing to go to Bob's Discount Furniture and buy Matthew a new sofa. If he was demanding something that I wouldn't ever give in on, I'd say that I was sorry and then I would weather any storm that came my way.

IDEA #3 – HAVE 3 SECRET GAMES OR TOYS AT YOUR DISCRETION THAT YOUR CHILD HASN'T SEEN OR HASN'T USED IN A WHILE: My colleague Carol was the queen of this strategy. I was never that organized. Carol would always have a new Game Boy game or a new video or a nifty remote controlled car in her cupboard. When things got tense, Carol would make a minor demand on Sam and then give him the game or toy. She would say, "Sam, you go brush your teeth and make your bed and I'll let you play Kirby's Dream Land for 45 minutes." She would follow through with the deal. And at the end of the 45 minutes she would take the game or toy and put it back in the cupboard.

It's sometimes tricky to find these secret games or videos or toys. But if you can find a couple, it will make your life easier. Never, however, give the prized item without some small demand.

IDEA #4 – DEVELOP A LARGE MOTOR ACTIVITY SO THAT YOUR CHILD CAN EXPEND SOME ENERGY: I bought Matthew a mini trampoline and put it in my living room so Matt could jump on it and I could put supper together. Matthew and I also liked to walk. We would walk and walk and Matt would pull a wagon. Other parents have had their children run laps around the house or up and down the street. They have had their children shoot baskets. Sometimes I would put towels at the bottom of the steps and have Matt run up the steps and place the towels, one at a time, on my bed. It was a way to get him to run up and down the steps and expend some energy.



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IDEA #5 – GIVE A BIG REINFORCER FOR MINOR COMPLIANCE, OR MAKE A BARGAIN: My son would do almost anything for a can of Coke. When I was at my wit's end, I would have him put a 24-piece puzzle together and then I would give him a can of Coke. As with the secret toy or game, I would never just give Matthew a Coke. He had to do something to earn it. I had to be good at balancing the demand with the value of the reinforcer.

One of the things that almost never works is to ask for the absence of a behavior to earn something. It's not a great strategy to say, "If you can be quiet and leave me alone for 30 minutes (or 2 hours, or all day), I'll take you to Burger King for lunch."

The nice thing about having Matthew do a puzzle was that we both knew when he was finished. It was a concrete thing with a definitive end. Asking Matthew to play with Legos for a half hour was too ephemeral a task.

Considerations and Warnings:

These are strategies which for which you need to lay the ground work: You have to play a game with your child during non-stressful times. You have to test out the secret game or toy to see if your child would really like it. You need to think of the small demand before you need to make it. You should practice making a plan on a regular basis so that it's part of the daily routine. You need to buy a trampoline or decide whether it is worth the risk to have your child do laps around the house.

Don't lecture your child: When things are tense, when you are at your wit's end, it is not a teachable moment. It is not the time to lecture the child on the error of her ways. It is not the time to explain why she will be a loser when she grows up if she doesn't start listening to you. When things are tense, your child isn't listening to you anyway. It may make you feel better to scold/lecture/chastise your child. There is no reason not to have a meaningful conversation with your child about the rules of the house, the expectation that you have, or about the long-term consequences of her behavior. You need to look for a calm, teachable moment to have that conversation, not when you are angry, frustrated or at your wit's end.

Don't give your child chores to do. If you are at your wit's end, your assigning chores probably won't work anyway. We firmly believe in regular, predictable chores. But asking your child to clean the garage because you can't stand to look at her anymore doesn't usually result in anything good. Make a plan instead. Chores can be part of the larger plan. But don't just arbitrarily assign an onerous task.

Don't send your child to her room. Actually, you can do this if your child doesn't have a history of wreaking havoc in her room when she gets sent there. But if she has a tantrum when you send her there, she will devolve into property destruction or self-injury or something else that you don't want. What you really want is to break the tension, get a little control over the situation and re-group.