



## Counsellor's Corner

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### The Wall of Futility

Several years ago, I was in the lobby at the Aquatic Centre when a youngster (approximately 4 years old) came running down the hall from the change rooms away from his mom. His bellows of, "CANDYYYYYYYY" could be heard across the building, as could his mother's strong reprimand, "If you run ahead of me, I am **not** buying you anything from the candy machine!" Oblivious to her directive, he ran to the candy machines and started spinning the dials, hoping that some sweet treats would magically reward his efforts. His mom continued her reprimanding from across the room, insisting that he would not get any candy for running off. As she stormed up to him in frustration, he started whimpering and stomping his feet, banging on the machines and demanding candy. She dug in her pockets for a quarter as she chastised him through clenched teeth, "I swear, the next time you run away from me, you are not getting anything!" She slipped the quarter in the machine, he received his reward and they went off happily.

While this well-meaning mother effectively cut off what likely would have turned into a public spectacle, she unwittingly took from her child the opportunity to go through the process of building resilience.

Frustration with limits → Anger → Sadness → Resilience

Children at such a young age (and sometimes into their teen years) have few problem solving skills and very little resilience for facing situations that are uncomfortable for them. The result of low resilience combined with minimal skills in problem solving are the "terrible twos" or what we commonly recognize as temper tantrums. While developmentally appropriate for a 2 or 3 year old, we often see these same kind of behaviours in older children and tend to resort to discipline to correct what are then referred to as "poor coping skills."

Gordon Neufeld, a Vancouver psychologist and author of the book Hold Onto Your Kids, encourages parents to allow their children to reach what he calls the "Wall of Futility" and not be rescued from their anger or sadness.

*Without frustration, our children will not develop resilience and the ability to adapt.*

"Without frustration, our children will not develop resilience and the ability to adapt. When we fix situations for our children so that they don't actually feel futility and disappointment, the end result is often "a negative loop of aggressive behaviours and chronic frustration that has no outlet" (Francesca Redden, 2019).

In the moment, parents often attempt to avoid a meltdown (especially in a public place) by just giving in to what the child is requesting and "fixing" the situation. Unfortunately, when this pattern is repeated, we end up with children who have low frustration-tolerance and high aggression. While giving in is easier in the moment, the results can have very damaging long-term consequences.

So, how does a parent “sit with anger”? By not showing anger ourselves or trying to fix the situation. Using phrases like, “Yes, I can understand why you are angry that I am not buying that for you, that must feel very frustrating” rather than, “I buy you something every time we come here – why can’t you just be satisfied with what you already have?” This isn’t to say that a parent should allow abusive behaviour; instead, acknowledge the anger, allow the child to express his frustration (stomping feet, hitting pillow, ripping up paper), and then wait it out until it turns to tears or sadness. Acknowledge the sadness and stick to the plan of resilience growth by comforting your child, but still not fixing the situation for him. In the pool lobby scenario, the end of the story could have been,

*.....As she stormed up to him in frustration, he started whimpering and stomping his feet, banging on the machines and demanding candy. The mother empathized with the child and calmly said, “Sweetie, I know that you really want some of that candy, but I am not buying it for you today.” (Note, she is not chastising or trying to teach him what he did wrong here; rather, just acknowledging his feelings and stating the facts). He continued stomping his feet and screaming at her as she calmly walked out of the building and held the door for him while she patiently waited for him to join her. He stomped to the car and kicked the tire, telling his mom that he hated her. She replied, “I understand you are angry and I still love you.” He screamed at her for the first five minutes of the drive home and finally started crying.” (Wall of futility). When they arrived home, she offered him a hug and allowed the experience, rather than a lecture, to be the lesson. They had a cuddle and a story as he cried out his feelings of futility. The next time they went to the pool, before entering the building, the mom said to him, “I sure hope I get to buy you something from the candy machine today. What will you have to remember to do after we leave the change room for that to happen?”*

Gordon Neufeld (2019) states that one of the main causes of problem behaviour in our children is the “inability to feel futility when it is encountered... children need to FEEL sadness and disappointment when they encounter something they cannot change..... If behaviour has become stuck, we should be asking ourselves how to help the child find the lost tears of sadness that would help them walk the maze of life.”

We are seeing less and less resilience in our children because they are frustrated less than they have ever been and rarely are allowed to hit that wall of futility. Unfortunately, it is very tempting to take the easy parenting road and use distractions like screens to keep our children happy and occupied so they don't have to feel angry or sad (now a popular sighting in many grocery carts is toddlers with a screen in their hands). The result is children who have a very low tolerance for anything outside of their wants or desires, a decrease in patience and a decrease in the ability to manage their frustrations.

The parent who makes 3 different dinner choices so everyone is happy, the parent who won't turn off the wireless because the last time she did, the child threw the controller at her and broke it, the parent who scrambles to entertain his child by buying the latest video game to avoid a meltdown...are all examples of caring parents who are trying to make their kids happy, but instead, are preventing their children from building resilience through disappointment.

The next time you see a parent with an angry or temper-tantruming child in public, give them a knowing and supportive smile, understanding that they are actively parenting their child to build resilience. I encourage you to take the time to allow your child to go through the process of anger until she feels the sadness of futility. Support her through the process, knowing that you are helping her build lifelong skills that will help her mature and grow emotionally and socially.

For more suggestions or assistance with parenting tips, contact your school or community counsellor.