How to defuse a child's tantrum with one question

Fabiana Santos | *May 01, 2017*

This parenting tip could change the game with your little ones.

I have not read every child psychology book, nor did I take a course on how to avoid/stop/end a child's tantrum. But because of a personal experience with my 5-year-old daughter, I really want to share a "formula" that I learned recently so that people can change course when kids insist on getting all worked up over something small.

But first, I need to tell you a story. My daughter started kindergarten and she was a little anxious. And this behavior ended up unfolding at home: she was increasingly throwing tantrums over anything, even the smallest most meaningless things. On the school's recommendation, we booked a few sessions with a child psychologist so that Alice could talk about what she was feeling in hopes things would calm down.

Among the many tips that psychologist Sally Neuberger gave us, there was one that I found fantastic, although it was very simple — and that's exactly why I feel it's worth sharing.

The psychologist explained to me that we need to make children feel respected in the sense of acknowledging what they are feeling. And so, at the time of a crisis, whatever the reason for it, we need to help kids (ages 5 and up) think and figure out what is going on with them. When we acknowledge what they are going through, and at the same time make them participate in solving the problem, we can disarm the tantrum.

More objectively: When a tantrum starts — either because the doll's arm came off, or because it's time to go to bed, or because the homework did not come out the way she wanted, or because he did not want to do a chore — whatever the reason, we can ask them the following question, looking into their eyes and in a calm voice:

"Is this a big problem, a medium problem, or a small problem?"

For my daughter, those moments of sincerely thinking about what was going on around her have become magical, at least here at home. And every time I ask the question and she answers, we find a way to solve the problem, starting from her perception of where to look for the solution. A small problem is always quick and simple to solve. There are some problems she considers medium. They will most likely be solved, but not at that instant, and she has to understand that there are things that need

some time to happen. If a problem is serious — and obviously what is serious from a child's point-of-view is not something to be dismissed, even though it may seem silly to us — you might need to talk it over more and help her understand that sometimes there are things that do not go exactly the way we want.

I can give many examples where I have used this little question recently. During one instance, we were choosing clothes for school. My daughter often makes a big fuss over her outfits, especially when it's cooler out. To summarize: she wanted to wear her favorite pair of pants but they were in the wash. She started to melt down and I asked, "Alice, is this a big, medium, or small problem?" She looked at me sheepishly and said quietly, "Small." And I once again explained that we already knew that small problems are easy to solve. I asked for her suggestions on how we would solve that small problem (I learned that it is important to give her time to think and respond) and she said, "Choosing other pants." And I added, "And you have more than one pair of pants to choose from." She smiled and went to get another pair of pants. I congratulated her on having solved the problem herself because, of course, valuing the solution is an essential aspect, to finish off the story.