

Helping Children Manage Their Emotions



Have you ever been in a situation where your child has a meltdown that includes crying, screaming, or lashing out at objects or other people? Often times these behaviors occur when a child is tired, hungry, or frustrated, and isn't able to communicate how they are feeling. It can be really embarrassing, especially when it happens in public.

The good news is that there are things we can do as parents to help them learn how to manage their emotions. The key thing to remember is that once children get to the point that they are experiencing intense emotions, it is very difficult to reason with them. This is why it is best to teach them skills and strategies when they are already calm. This way, when they start to get upset, you can then remind them to use one of the approaches they already know.

Try the strategies below to help your child learn to stay calm.

- **Parents need to stay calm.** In order for you to help your child manage their emotions, you need to be in control of yourself first. Make sure that you communicate with

your words, facial expressions, tone of voice, and gestures that you are calm and ready to help them be calm.

- **Identify common triggers.** Try to identify what triggers emotional outbursts in your child so you can prevent them in the first place. Look for things like time of day, people they are around, specific activities they are doing. Make a list of these things and keep track of strategies that seem to work and under what circumstances.
- **Don't reinforce acting out behaviors.** Often times, children will continue to act out or raise the level of their outburst because they have learned that their parents will eventually give in or give up. If children end up getting what they want from acting out, they are being reinforced for this behavior and are likely to continue doing it. Teaching children that outbursts aren't an effective way to get what they want will take patience and consistency on your part.
- **Show empathy.** No matter the age of your child, a little empathy can go a long way. Letting your child know that you know they are going through a hard time is a good way to start the interaction with them because it lets them know you are on their team. Even if what they are upset about seems ridiculous to you, in their mind it can seem like the end of the world. Try saying, "I get why you are upset right now," or "I know you are mad about what just happened."
- **Be specific about the behaviors that are not acceptable.** Instead of saying, "stop acting like a baby," try being specific by saying something like, "you are screaming and throwing your toys and that is not okay."
- **Give them some strategies to try and practice with them.** Some simple strategies that help children calm down include counting to five, taking some deep breaths, holding an object such as a toy that they like, and

having a calm-down place. Try saying something like, "When you're mad, instead of screaming and crying, take some deep breaths and count to five." It also helps for you to actually show them what you want to see them do by doing it with them. For example, "On the count of three, let's take a deep breath to calm down. Ready, one, two, three..." Remember that negative behavior patterns can take some time to unlearn and that practicing the strategies when they are already calm is best.

- **Allow them time to calm down.** Know when they need time to calm down and remind them to use one of their strategies. For example, say "I'm going to give you five minutes to go to your room and calm down. I'll check on you in a few minutes to see how you're doing." Let them know that the sooner they go to their calm-down place, the sooner you will be able to listen to them.
- **Teach them to use their words.** Once they calm down, try to get them to tell you what made them so upset. The goal is for them to be able to tell you what is bothering them before they have a meltdown. Give them the guidance to use their words to tell you that they are mad or feeling frustrated instead of throwing an object, hurting someone else, or yelling. You can explain that once they tell you that they are upset, you will be able to help them figure out how to deal with it.

You may not be able to prevent all of their meltdowns, but hopefully by using the strategies above, you can help your child learn to manage their emotions and keep their emotional outbursts to a minimum.

For more information, check out these additional resources:

<https://www.gottman.com/blog/age-age-guide-helping-kids-manage-emotions/>

<https://extension.psu.edu/programs/betterkidcare/early-care/ti>

p-pages/all/talking-with-preschoolers-about-emotions
http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/familytools/teaching_emotions.pdf

References

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By Lisa Schainker, Extension Assistant Professor