

How Children Can Cope with Emotions: Tips for Parents

Young children often experience many strong emotions as they learn to handle disappoint and manage conflict with their peers. As young children gain an understanding of emotion, they become better able to manage and appropriately express their feelings and behaviors. Controlling anger and impulses is possibly the most challenging emotional task for young children. Children who learn to cope with their emotions constructively have an easier time relating to adults and other children (National Research Council & Institutes of Medicine, 2000). Children who aren't able to manage their own feelings have more conflict, less problem solving skills and don't do as well in school. It is important to teach young children about their emotions and how to manage them in the same way we teach literacy and other academics. Additionally, emotional regulation is fostered not only by learning the skills, but also by the confidence and security that a warm, responsive relationship with a caregiver provides young children. Below are some strategies that provide children support and encouragement they need to be successful in managing the difficult feelings that occur so frequently in young children.

What Things Can We Do to Help Our Children Behave Well?

1. Give clear directions:

- Tell your child exactly what you want them to do.

2. Give your child lots of "good stuff" when they behave well:

- Give praise, hugs, and spend special time together.

3. Catch them being good:

- Recognize when they are being good and praise them (e.g. "I am glad you came in for dinner without having to be reminded." or "I appreciate your hanging up your clothes even though you were in a hurry to go and play." or "You were really patient while I was on the phone.").

4. Be consistent:

- Always do what you say you will and act the same way in each situation.

5. Warn children about transitions:

- Tell your child several minutes before it is time to come in to dinner, time to go to bed, time to stop playing, time to turn off the TV, or time to clean up their toys.



6. Listen actively:

- Stop what you are doing, make eye contact with your child and pay attention to what they are saying.

7. Teach your child to express themselves verbally and recognize their feelings:

- Label your child's feelings and talk about them using a question (e.g. *Are you angry?* or *Are you scared?*).
- Help your child talk about what is going on.

8. Express an interest in your child's activities.

- Ask your child about what they are doing.
- Join them while they are playing.

What Can We Do to Encourage Our Children?

1. Avoid discouraging your child by:

- Expressing negative expectations (e.g. "No you can't use that; you'll break it.").
- Focusing on mistakes (e.g. "This doesn't look good where you colored outside the lines, does it?").
- Perfectionism; expecting too much (e.g. "This isn't a bad report card, but with your potential you could have done better.").
- Overprotection; expecting too little.

2. Take care not to undermine your encouraging words (e.g.

- "You worked hard on that; I wish you always would." or "You can do it ... if you quit whining and get busy.").

3. Catch them being good as often as possible.

4. Show confidence in them by:

- Giving them some reasonable responsibilities.
- Asking their advice or opinions about things they know (e.g. play).
- Avoid the temptation to take over even if they are expressing frustration (e.g. "Keep trying, you can do it!").

5. Build on your child's strengths:

- Acknowledge what they do well.
- Encourage them to take the next step.
- Concentrate on improvement, not perfection.

6. Let your child know that you value them:

- Separate worth from accomplishments (e.g. "Playing your hardest is more important than winning.").
- Separate worth from misbehavior (e.g. "No, you're not bad, but it is bad to put crayons on the wall.").
- Appreciate your child's uniqueness and let them know.



How Do You Respond to Your Angry Child?

1. **Minimize the need to say “NO” to your child:**
 - Move tempting things out of the way and; store items in a safe place.
2. **Use distractions:**
 - Redirecting their attention toward less frustrating or more acceptable activities.
3. **Give your child choices within the limit of what is acceptable.**
4. **If your child has a tantrum, stay within his or her sight and carry on your normal activities without talking to him or her:**



5. **Be aware of your feeling and try to stay calm:**
 - If a child is hurting himself or others, he may need to be moved to a safer place.
6. **Use closeness or touching:**
 - Move closer to your child to lessen his impulses. Some children are calmed by a nearby adult.

7. **Be ready to show affection:**
 - Sometimes a sudden hug or other sudden affection can help a child regain control. Some children need to be held.
8. **Say “NO:”**
 - Limits should be clearly explained and enforced.
 - Also tell children what they should be doing instead.
9. **Provide physical outlets:**
 - It is important for children to have physical exercise and movement.
10. **Accept your child’s angry feelings:**
 - Offer them suggestions for showing their anger in “safe” ways.
 - Use words like “out of control” rather than “bad child.”
 - Let them know it is okay to be angry, but not to hurt people/things.

For more information, visit the Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning at <http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu>.

What Are Safe Ways of Being Angry and Calming Down?

1. **Count to ten.**
2. **Do the lemon squeeze:**
 - This technique involves squeezing a pretend lemon in each hand, making large puddles of lemon juice, and then dropping the lemons in the juice to make them splash.
3. **Blow out birthday candles with deep breaths:**
 - Have them hold up four or five fingers according to their age and blow each finger down.
4. **Blow imaginary bubbles until they pop.**
5. **Fill their belly up like a balloon, let the air out, and blow the teacher over.**
6. **Use their words and say “I feel angry when you do ...”**
7. **Walk away from the situation and go to a calming “get it together” space.**
8. **Do thumb squeezes:**
 - Hold up your thumbs and have them squeeze your thumbs.
9. **Ask an adult for help.**
10. **Tell yourself “stop,” hide your turtle shell (e.g. have child curl up small), take a breath, count to three, and tell yourself “I am going to try again.”**
11. **Shut your eyes, picture your safe place, and tell yourself “I am okay.”**

