

Managing Big Emotions

Ways to help children emotionally regulate during displays of big emotions

Emotional regulation is when we are not overwhelmed by how we are feeling. This is not necessarily calm. It is, for example, when someone is angry and able to express that without verbally or physically harming self, others, and/or objects. *It is important to allow children to express and feel their emotions.* Telling them to be calm may unintentionally cause children to think it is not okay to be angry or sad and prevents children from learning how to sit with uncomfortable emotions.

When a Child has a Big Emotion (not emotionally regulated):

- 1) Name their Emotion:** Research has shown that just by naming how your child is feeling helps them to express their emotions and to regulate themselves. Naming their emotions also helps them to learn what they are feeling so that later they may be able to verbalize these emotions.
- 2) Keep Talking to a Minimum:** When a child is really upset, or dysregulated, they can't process information as well as when they are regulated. This is not a teachable moment, and they cannot take in a lecture. Your goal is to get them through this rough moment. Keep what you say short and repeat the same phrase. Repeating it is helpful because they aren't processing information and words as they usually would.
- 3) Body language is Important:** When children are upset getting down to their level to speak, direct eye contact, arms not crossed, talking slowly, and in a quiet tone helps them feel heard and understood. This calm demeanor could also help them regulate.
- 4) Stay Regulated and Model Coping Strategies:** When kids are young, caregivers are showing them how to regulate emotions and also helping them regulate their emotions. Some strategies you can model in the moment are deep breaths, naming sights and sounds, and counting to ten backwards.
- 5) Direct them to their Calm (Cool down) Corner:** Their calm corner is a time-in type place where they can go to safely let out their emotions. This space can be in their room or in a more public space. It is important that this space is inviting for them and is set up with ways for them to let out their emotions. Fill the calm corner with sights, sounds, smells, tactile objects because sensory objects help children regulate. Some examples are: bubbles, fidgets, stuffed animals, Kinetic Sand, playdoh, weighted blankets, shakers for music, and scented bracelets/pillow.

When a Child is "calm" (Emotionally Regulated):

- 1) Problem-solve:** When both caregiver and child are regulated they can work together to figure out what happened; 1) the trigger, 2) what their body felt like/anger warning signs, 3) problem solve/redirect/remind them of healthy/safe ways to let out their big emotions.

Steps to Support Children's Ability of Self-Regulation *Reducing the severity and frequency of big displays of emotions*

When a Child is "Emotionally Regulated":

1) Identify Triggers: Emotions usually tell us that there is a problem to be solved. Start by talking about what's making them angry, upset. Help them identify those triggers, so you both know for the next time. Is it a particular school subject that makes them frustrated? Perhaps being hungry or thirsty? Are there specific noises or locations that are frustrating? Explore what other emotions they may be feeling under the anger like hurt or sad.

2) Warning Signs: Sometimes kids do not know they are angry until after the explosion has happened. Help them identify where they feel emotions in their body, such as red face, heart beating fast. Over time, they'll start to recognize that feeling and ideally use a coping skill before things get too overwhelming. Talk about how it is okay to feel angry and it is not okay to hurt other people when angry.

3) Create a Big Emotions Plan: Together, work on a plan that is clear, simple, written out and posted around the house. The plan would include 1) How (such as a specific list of strategies) they will stop themselves if they notice they are being triggered, 2) where they will go to safely express emotions 3) what they want to use to express emotions, 4) who to talk to when they want to share their feelings, and 5) what you, as a caregiver, will do if their emotions have taken over.

4) Practice Practice Practice: One of the best things you can do is *model and teach coping skills to kids* before things escalate. By practicing their safe emotions plan every day they will be able to more easily use those same strategies when their emotions have taken over and their thinking brain is offline. Practicing ways to safely let out emotions normalizes the fact that people get upset sometimes. The important thing is that people let out their anger in safe ways. One way to do this is to find time each day as a family to talk about things they liked and did not like about their day and then to all use a strategy to let out their emotions. Additionally, it can be helpful to have kids practice having a safe tantrum, a display of big emotions minus the problem behavior. After practicing use praise to encourage the safe tantrum and hopefully reduce the problem behaviors when or if they have a non-practice tantrum.

5) Model and Share: Discuss and model for kids what your triggers, warning signs, and strategies are for staying regulated. This normalizes and destigmatizes needing help with anger, talk about how it is hard for anyone to safely let out emotions. It is important that caregivers show and verbalize to their kids how they safely let out their own emotions when upset. The use of I-messages is one way to teach kids how to safely communicate feelings. An I-message is I feel---- because/when ---- can you please----. Saying I feel--- reduces judgment and blaming, which decreases the likelihood that kids shut down and go on the defensive, which can escalate situations.

6) Change Takes Time: Change consists of two steps forwards, one step back. Change and regulating emotions is hard for anyone especially kids. Change takes consistency, a lot of daily practice by kids and the rest of their family. It is important that the whole family is modeling ways to safely communicate and regulate emotions. Using coping skills to deal with big feelings will not go perfectly every time. Learning to manage anger is a work in progress. Little by little, with practice and time, kids will get better at it. Encourage them when they make safe and healthy choices. When they do not, help them problem solve.

7) Setting Expectations: Boundaries and expectations are important and can be in place **WHILE** also validating and naming their feelings. For example, I understand you are mad (validation) and it is also important that you try to show that anger in ways that don't hurt other people (boundaries).

Safe Ways to Let Out Emotions

To help children emotionally regulate and then calm down

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Take a shower/splash face with cold water/cold cloth on face• Roll across the floor back and forth• Be active- run, dance, jump, spin, stomp• Jump on a trampoline• Jumping jacks• Carry/push heavy things around• Do wall push-ups• Push against a wall• Squeeze a stress ball• Lay or bounce on a ball• Scribble on paper and crumple it up• Clench hands then release• Put the palms of your hands together, push and release• Stretches• Squish playdough/kinetic sand• Suck on ice• Wrap up in a weighted or non-weighted blanket• Name sounds, sights, smells- exploring senses• Journal• Doodle on paper• Listen to music• Listen to nature sounds• Play a musical instrument | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Deep long breaths• Blow Bubbles• Blow a pinwheel• Wrap your arms around yourself and squeeze• Hug a stuffy• Hug Someone• Relaxing smells (lavender, rosemary)• Use scented lotion• Time outside- nature is calming• Noise reducing headphones• Pet a cat or dog• Hum or sing a song• Use a calming jar• Guided visualizations• Look at a lava lamp/hourglass• Play with bubble wrap• Wear an eye mask• Use a mini massager• Climb into a body sock• Turn off the lights• Use a positive affirmation• Trace your hand with your fingers• Small Fan to cool down |
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