

# Young Children and Emotional Regulation

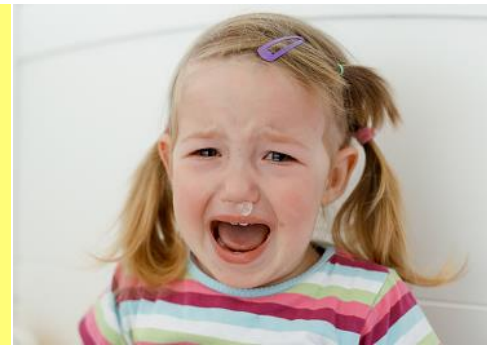
Emotional regulation--or, the ability to identify, process, and express one's emotions in a healthy and appropriate way--is an imperative skill for young children to develop. Learning how to regulate one's emotions is a foundational building block for being able to deal with tough situations and to cope with anger, frustration, and sadness. Helping your child to practice communicating their feelings also enables them to create strong friend and family relationships. When your child is able to process and express their emotions, they begin building confidence in their ability to face and solve problems. Practicing self-reflection with your child when they have experienced something frustrating but were able to move through it, will enable them to believe that they are able to handle similar situations in the future, creating a foundation for lifelong resilience.

You can begin to assist your child in developing emotional regulation skills first by helping them to **label** their feelings. As children are still learning language, vocabulary, and communication, we can help them find the correct word to connect to the feeling in their body. For instance, if your child dropped their structure on the ground and it broke, they might be mad. They may choose to make a mad face, scream, or stomp. At this moment you can say to them, "I'm noticing that you are making an angry face. You might be feeling mad."

Next, you will want to **validate** your child's feelings. Children can often be easily overwhelmed by their emotions; although we may not understand why they are upset over something that seems insignificant to us, it matters to them a great deal and their feelings are still very real. You can say to your child, "I know that you dropped your structure and that is making you mad. That is so frustrating for you, and it is ok to feel angry." It is important not to label any feelings as being "bad" or shameful. As human beings we experience a wide range of emotions, and children can learn that it's okay to not feel happy all of the time. It is important to acknowledge all of your child's feelings and let them know that it is okay to experience those emotions.

After labeling and validating how your child is feeling, you can support them by **helping them communicate** how they are feeling. For some children this may be as simple as telling them that they can repeat a phrase such as "I am mad about that." For a child who may have less expressive language, a chart with pictures of a variety of emotional expressions to which they can point is a useful tool. Some parents may choose to have their child choose a number from 1-10 to express how angry they might be on a scale. Whichever way you prompt your child to communicate their feelings, what is crucial is that your child **feels heard and validated**.

**Modeling** how you deal with emotions is also a wonderful teaching tool for your child as they observe you in their daily lives. Next time you are feeling frustrated, you can try thinking out loud in front of your child and saying, "I'm making a mad face because I'm so frustrated. I think I am going to take three deep breaths to calm down."



## Using Literacy to Teach Emotional Regulation

Books can be a fantastic tool for helping children understand emotional regulation. While listening to a story, children are able to relate to characters' experiences. You can use these books as prompts for rich discussions about a time when your child may have been feeling the same way as a character in the story you are reading. These books are a great place to start:

- *When Sophie Gets Angry, Really Really Angry* by Molly Bang
- *The Story of My Feelings* by Laurie Berkner
- *Glad Monster, Sad Monster* by Anne Miranda and Ed Emberley
- *The Feelings Book* by Todd Parr
- *The Pigeon Has Feelings Too* by Mo Willems
- *My Many Colored Days* by Dr. Seuss
- "How Do Dinosaurs..." Series by Jane Yolen and Mark Teague

# Supporting Your Child Through a Tantrum

While tantrums can be unpleasant and frustrating for both you and your child, they do present an opportunity for your child to practice building their emotional regulation and self-reflection skills. Whatever your child is upset about, be it bedtime or leaving grandma's, tantrums often occur as a result of your child being unable to express their feelings, lacking impulse control, and seeking control over the situation. Knowing this, there are some measures you can take to try to avoid these challenging emotional reactions with your child:



## Calm Down Strategies

**Cozy Corner:** create a cozy space in the house or room where your child knows they can go to calm down when overwhelmed. In this space you might include:

- Paper for ripping apart
- Pillow for yelling into, hitting, or squeezing
- Clay, playdough, stress squeezers, or some other tool to manipulate with the hands

**Blow out the Candles:** Hold up 4 fingers, take a deep breath to “blow out” each

**Yoga Breaths:** one hand on the belly, one hand on the chest, with a focus on feeling the body expand/get bigger and contract/get smaller

**Taking a Water Break:** walk away from the situation, cease conversation, and drink water to focus the mind and calm the body

1. **Pick and choose your battles wisely.** Does your child really need to wear an outfit that matches or is it more important to get out the door on time without a battle?
2. **Plan ahead and provide clear transitional warnings.** When your child is given notice before it is time to leave their current activity, they will have more time to mentally prepare and not feel rushed away from something they were working hard on.
3. **Provide choice whenever possible.** Giving your child the choice of whose hand to hold when walking, or what pair of shoes to wear before leaving the house, will provide them with a sense of control and intrinsic motivation to do what needs to be done.
4. **Give positive attention.** Finding moments to point out when your child is working really hard to be helpful, or is completing what they need to do appropriately, can motivate your child to continue to do what they are doing.

No matter what you do, some tantrums are inevitable, and it is important to handle them appropriately. You may want to begin by reflecting on how you typically respond to your child's tantrum. In these moments it is important to try to remain as calm as possible, as it is harder for your child to calm down if they see you becoming upset. If you find yourself getting frustrated with your child, you may want to “tag out” with another caretaker or adult and take a minute to calm down. It is also appropriate to say to your child, “I am actually getting a little too frustrated, so I’m going to go take some deep breaths before we talk about this.” Modeling this may encourage your child to do the same.

It is also important to hold firm to the limits you've set, while still validating your child's feelings and experiences. You can say, “I understand that you are so frustrated that it is time to leave! It is still time to go to school today.” Giving into your child's tantrum will only increase the likelihood of similar behaviors in the future. Instead, offer up suggestions to help your child calm down, along with a hug or other kinds of physical comfort. If they are continuing to tantrum, active ignoring may be your next step. This means you may say to your child, “I know that you are frustrated but it is hard to help you when you are screaming. I am going to go sit on the couch, and when your body is ready to speak in a regular voice you can come join me. Then we can figure out how to feel better.” Once your child notices that their behavior does not maintain your attention, they will often calm themselves down and seek you out for further comfort.

After your child has calmed down from their tantrum, this may be a great time to practice reflection. Together you can remember and discuss what happened to cause the emotion, the behavior your child exhibited, and what they might do differently next time. It is important to focus on their appropriate efforts, rather than their inappropriate behaviors. For instance, rather than “See, was it really so hard to stop crying?”, you might say “You calmed your body down so quickly!”. When you support your child in engaging in self-reflection, they will be able to continue building on these experiences next time they feel emotionally overwhelmed.

### Sources:

<https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/1790-toddler-tantrums-101-why-they-happen-and-what-you-can-do>

<https://childmind.org/article/how-to-help-children-calm-down/>