

Managing Your Own Emotions: The Key to Positive, Effective Parenting



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Being the parent of a young child is an intensely emotional experience. There is the pure pleasure of cuddling, nuzzling, playing, laughing, exploring, and delighting in your baby's daily growth and discoveries. And then there are the challenges—the moments of stress, anger, frustration, and resentment—at not knowing what a baby's cry means and how to calm her, at the totally irrational demands of a toddler, or at the aggressive behavior of an older child toward a new baby. These experiences naturally evoke strong feelings that can be hard to handle.

But it is important to tune in to and manage these feelings because it is how you react in these moments that makes the difference in your child's development. Your response impacts his ability to learn good coping skills and guides his future behavior. Imagine a 2-year-old who is falling apart because he can't cope with the fact that you gave him his cereal in the blue bowl instead of his favorite red bowl (as unbelievably irrational as that might be—such is life with a toddler). Reacting with anger and frustration is likely to further distress the child rather than help him calm and cope. Learning to manage your own reactions is one of most important ways you can reduce your own—and your child's—distress. It also teaches children how to manage their own emotions—a skill that helps them do better in school and in building friendships and other relationships as they grow.

Managing strong, negative emotions is surely much easier said than done. But it's worth the effort, because the payoff is huge, for you and your child. Here are some helpful guiding principles and strategies:

Tune in to your feelings. Feelings are not right or wrong. It is what you do with your feelings that can be helpful or hurtful. What's most important is that you tune in to and own your feelings so that you can make a conscious decision—versus a knee-jerk reaction—about how best to respond.

Look at behavior in the context of your child's development and temperament.

Having appropriate expectations is critical because the meaning you assign to your child's behavior impacts how you manage your own emotions and reactions to the behavior at hand. If you see the behavior as manipulative, or to be purposefully hurtful (i.e., biting, hitting), then you are more likely to react in ways that escalate instead of calm your child. And intense, angry reactions rarely result in teaching good coping skills. If, instead, you see these behaviors in the context of normal development, then you can approach your child with empathy, making it much more likely you will respond calmly and effectively.

Remember: You can't make your child do anything—eat, sleep, pee, poop, talk, or stop having a tantrum. What you do have control over is how you respond to your children's actions, as this is what guides and shapes their behavior. If throwing a tantrum results in extra TV time, a later bedtime, or simply getting more of your attention (a primary goal for older siblings dealing with major rivalry), your toddler is putting 2 and 2 together, making an important assessment: "Tantrums work! Excellent strategy! Put that one in the win column."

Putting It All Together

The Scenario: Three-year-old Jonah announces to his mother, Lauren, “You are the meanest mommy, and I hate you,” and then kicks her after Lauren tells him that the playdate is over—it’s time for Liam to go home.

Step 1—Tune in to your feelings: Lauren is feeling furious and wants to say: “You are the most ungrateful child ever! Liam has been here for 2 hours and I have put aside everything I needed to do to supervise, make cookies with you, set up the painting project, etc., etc. It’s never enough!” But she knows reacting angrily will not teach her child anything and will just increase both of their distress. She takes some deep breaths and thinks through how to respond to help Jonah learn to manage his strong emotions and accept the limit.

Step 2—Tune in to and validate your child: This is where having appropriate expectations comes in. Lauren reminds herself that at 3, children are still largely driven by their emotions and that the goal is to help Jonah learn to cope with life’s frustrations and disappointments. So she tells him calmly, “I know you are sad and angry that Liam has to go home. You have so much fun playing with him. It is always hard when a playdate ends. But you will be okay.” It is very important to communicate that you have confidence that your child can handle his difficult feelings. When you swoop in to make it all better, you inadvertently send the message that he can’t handle disappointment, which makes it less likely he will learn this important skill.

Step 3—If your child throws out some bait, don’t take it: Young children will use any strategy possible to get what they want, such as more TV time or extra dessert, or to avoid doing something they don’t like, such as getting dressed in the morning or brushing their teeth. The best way to eliminate behaviors you feel will not serve your child well in the real world is to ignore them. So in this case, it means Lauren not responding to Jonah’s provocation, “You are the meanest mommy...” She doesn’t allow it to divert attention from the limit she is setting, which is usually the goal of throwing out some bait— to control other’s actions and avoid something the child is uncomfortable with.

Step 4—Set the limit and provide choices: “It’s okay to be sad and angry, but it’s not okay to kick. Kicking hurts. I know you don’t want to hurt me, you’re just having a hard time controlling your body because you are so upset. So your choice is to take a break where you can calm your mind and body, or you can come help put the carrots into the salad for dinner.” If Jonah can’t yet pull himself together, Lauren will just move on, showing him with her actions that she can tolerate his being unhappy and disappointed, and that she trusts he has the ability to calm himself. This leaves Jonah with the choice to stay upset or pull himself together and hang out with his mom.

Managing your own emotions helps you feel more in control and frees you to respond to even the most challenging behaviors calmly and effectively.