

## Calm Parents, Calm Kids



One of the greatest challenges facing parents is the ability to remain calm when feeling upset, frustrated or annoyed.

A consistent theme throughout our articles is the importance of modelling the behaviour you want your child to exhibit—'be the adult you want your children to become'. The way you respond to your child when they are upset will shape how well they regulate their emotions. If your child is upset or frustrated, we all know that telling them to 'stop crying' or to 'calm down' will have little or no effect. So, what can we do to help calm our child's brain and guide them to make good decisions?

One of the first and most effective techniques is to calmly validate their feelings. You can do this by perhaps saying, 'I can see you are really angry right now, you feel very frustrated about this situation', or 'It looks to me like you want an answer right now. I understand how that could make you feel impatient'.

When your child is feeling strong emotions, take the opportunity to teach him/her to be aware of their feelings and to express them responsibly and respectfully.

Here are some basic tips on how to do this:

### 1. Calm yourself first

- Stop and take a deep breath before you engage with your child.
- Remind yourself that your goal is to calm the storm for your child, not escalate it.
- Don't take your child's emotions personally. This isn't about you, even if she's screaming, 'I hate you!' This is about her—her tangled up feelings and still-developing brain.
- Notice the sensations in your own body so that you're aware of what you're feeling.
- Decide that your goal is to use this opportunity to build a closer relationship with your child and teach him/her helpful lessons about accepting and responding to emotions.

### 2. Connect

- Reach out to connect emotionally and, if you can, physically by creating safety with your touch, warmth, tone and attitude.
- Breathe slowly and deeply and your child will usually begin to breathe more slowly too.



### 3. Empathise

- Your empathy creates safety by helping your child feel understood, e.g. 'You seem a little worried about this sleepover', or 'You look so mad!'
- If your child is describing a problem to you, repeat back to him/her what you've heard, e.g. 'You're fed up with your brother going into your room and taking your things', 'You must be so upset to talk to me that way, Charlotte. We can make this better. Let's start over'.
- Describing what your child is physically expressing helps him/her feel seen and heard, e.g. 'I see you're stomping your foot. You look frustrated', or 'Your arms are crossed over your chest like this, I wonder what's going on?'
- Acknowledge your child's perspective, e.g. 'You wish that...!', or 'This isn't what you wanted...!'

#### **4. Double-check that your child feels understood by what you've said**

- Your child may correct you, 'I'm not disappointed! I'm mad!'—in that case, try again. If possible, use your child's exact words so they know you're listening, e.g. 'I'm sorry, Josh. I see now how mad you are. Tell me more about why'.

#### **5. Deepen the conversation to help your child feel understood**

- You can do this by offering support, validating your child's emotions, or simply inviting your child to tell you more. Validation doesn't necessarily mean you agree, but that you understand why your child would feel this way. Some examples are listed below:
  - 'Ouch, that must have hurt!'
  - 'Oh, Sophie, no wonder you're upset'.
  - 'It would be really embarrassing to have your friend say that'.
  - 'You're saying that I love your sister more...Ethan, that must feel so awful, to feel that...'
  - 'I didn't understand how important this was to you. Tell me more'.
  - 'I hear how angry you are about this. What can I do to help make this better?'

### 6. Support your child to problem solve

Most of the time, when kids—and adults too, of course—feel their emotions are understood and accepted, the feelings lose their charge and begin to dissipate. This leaves an opening for problem solving. In this situation, resist the urge to tell them what to do to solve the problem, as this gives your child the message that you don't have confidence in their ability to handle it. If your child feels stuck, help them brainstorm and explore options, before stating the solution your child came up with. If you don't think the solution is wise ask, 'I wonder what would happen then?'

With practice you will find emotion coaching a very valuable and successful tool in helping to keep yourself calm while calming your child's brain. You'll begin to see your child get better at expressing their emotions in an acceptable way. Emotion coaching raises kids who are more emotionally intelligent and better at regulating their emotions. It helps you stay calm when your child is upset, which in turn creates a more peaceful, loving relationship, less drama and more solutions.

Follow these links to learn more about emotion coaching and calming a child's brain:

[www.gottman.com/blog/an-introduction-to-emotion-coaching/](http://www.gottman.com/blog/an-introduction-to-emotion-coaching/)  
[www.parentingcounts.org/information/timeline/five-steps-of-emotion-coaching/](http://www.parentingcounts.org/information/timeline/five-steps-of-emotion-coaching/)  
[www.theresiliencecentre.com.au/2017/03/27/emotion-coaching-a-brief-outline](http://www.theresiliencecentre.com.au/2017/03/27/emotion-coaching-a-brief-outline)  
<https://childdevelopmentinfo.com/parenting/calm-parents-are-better-able-to-help-children-handle-frustration/#gs.xuxwns>

We would love some feedback. Please don't hesitate to contact us to share your experiences with emotion coaching, or if you have a concern with your child that we may be able to help with.

**Gai Bath (Kinder–Year 6) and Jane Sutcliffe (Year 7–12)**

**SMC Counsellors**

[gbath@smc.tas.edu.au](mailto:gbath@smc.tas.edu.au)

[jsutcliffe@smc.tas.edu.au](mailto:jsutcliffe@smc.tas.edu.au)