

Parenting and Emotional Self-Control

Emotional self-control is a practice that involves being able to recognize and consider one's emotional experience and adapt one's emotional behavior to the needs of the situation. Most parents would agree that raising children offers many opportunities to practice emotional self-control. Harsh words and behaviors that come from losing control of our emotions can damage the trust that is the foundation of our relationships with our children.

Emotions naturally arise in response to the interactions we have with our children. We can think of emotions as messages sent to remind us of our expectations, wants, and needs. When we tune in to our emotions before we act, we are taking the first step in being able to control our emotional responses to our children's behaviors (see HE-0952 to learn more about increasing our self-awareness). The next step is to translate the messages of our emotions into behaviors that match our parenting goals and values. In this publication, we talk about self-management skills that help us meet the needs our children have for our best guidance and support.



Keep emotions in a manageable range.

We feel emotions at different levels of intensity. When emotions are strong, we feel a lot of energy pushing at us to do or say something. When emotions are milder, we may not feel a strong urge to act. For example, we could feel irked when a child behaves poorly, or we could feel anger to the point of fury. If we feel furious about our child's behavior, our response may be louder and harsher and more impulsive than if we were feeling merely frustrated. When we recognize a rising emotion at a lower level of intensity, the information carried in that emotion is more available to us to use in managing the situation. Regularly checking in with our emotions makes us more aware of what we can do or say before emotions rise to a higher intensity.

Control impulses.

Especially under the influence of sudden or strong negative emotions, some of us may feel the urge to lash out in some way at our children or others we care for. Others of us may feel like escaping—getting away from them, turning our backs on them, or leaving the room. Acting on these impulses may seem “natural” and make us feel better in the short run, but these high-emotion reactions rarely calm or resolve the situation. In the long run, if they happen regularly, they can cost us the trust of our loved ones.

The first step in controlling an intense negative emotion in the moment you feel it is to stop yourself from acting and speaking. Press the “pause button.” Do not move toward or away from your child. Hold your tongue. Lowering your body can help lower your emotional temperature—so if you are standing up, find a place to sit down.

When you choose to pause and tolerate the hot wave of an intense emotion, you can regain your ability to use the thinking part of your brain to do any of the following helpful things.

- Look for the message, or meaning, in the emotion that motivated the impulse.
- Find a different way to frame the situation.
- Think about what you want to accomplish in the present situation.
- Think through the consequences—for others and for yourself—of different response options.
- Check in with your values and goals.
- Shift your attention to the “bigger picture.”

Express emotions in appropriate ways.

Although our feelings arise in response to our interactions with others, they are ours alone to recognize and manage. We can't usually control the situations that happen to us or prepare ourselves for the emotions that come up in the moment, but how we express the emotions we feel is a choice we do control. Expressing our feelings in ways that respect others as well as ourselves is a skill we can improve.

For example, anger is an emotion parents may feel in response to children's misbehaviors. Some parents express anger by yelling or by verbally or physically threatening their child. Although these behaviors alert children to their parents' disapproval, they don't give children enough information to make better choices. A more helpful response is to describe how the child's behavior has affected us by giving voice to our emotion and the message behind it. For example, “I feel

Stressful thoughts and feelings	Calming responses
I'll never be able to finish this! (discouragement)	I will take this one day at a time.
I always have this problem! (hopelessness)	This is a problem I have experience handling.
My son never minds me!	My son needs my firm guidance.

angry and disappointed that you lied to me. When you lie, you're showing me that I can't trust what you say.”

Being clear about why we feel angry helps children understand why their behavior choices matter. This type of response also offers children a model for how to communicate about their own anger. Furthermore, when we provide a clear statement about the values that motivate our feelings, along with applying reasonable consequences, we give children valuable guidance that can help them change their behavior in the future.

Not every situation requires that we share our emotions or the values behind them. In fact, sometimes the results of doing so would do more harm than good. In these cases, finding ways to express those feelings later is still important. There are many healthy outlets for releasing emotions, including the following:

- Sharing the experience with a trusted friend or family member
- Writing in a journal
- Talking with a counselor or religious/spiritual advisor
- Engaging in physical exercise or dance
- Expressing ourselves through creative arts, such as music or crafts

Knowing what we can do with our feelings is a big part of being able to manage them in healthy ways.

Persevere in the face of challenge.

In everyday life, problems and challenges inevitably crop up. When they do, the ability to calm the feelings that arise with them is an important part of being able to persevere. We can learn to calm them by first recognizing the negative thoughts we are thinking that make us want to give up. Because these negative thoughts stir up stressful feelings, it's important to respond to them by telling ourselves calming things.

Set goals and mark progress toward them.

Having meaningful goals to work toward keeps us focused on the values and priorities that we believe are important for ourselves and our families. When we choose to notice how the choices we make and the actions we take move us toward or away from those goals, we hold ourselves accountable in ways that can help us do better.

Developing these abilities—to set goals, to work through challenges, and to tame our impulses, thoughts, and emotions—is essential for gaining control of our lives. We support the development of our children's emotional self-control by being good models of these self-management skills.



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