



When the feelings of young children erupt, parents can use the moment to help their kids learn emotional regulation.

Calming your upset child

Helping youngsters navigate (and learn from) their emotions

WRITTEN BY CHERYL MAHAFFY

You're in the checkout line at the grocery store when your toddler wants an enticing candy, but you say no. Emotions erupt, and suddenly you're the epicentre of attention. Now what? Such moments are perfect for helping your young child learn emotional regulation.

Make sure your child is safe.

"You may fear that everyone within earshot is passing judgment, but stay focused on your child," says Suzanne Blair, program coordinator with the AHS Early Childhood Team.

"Within a minute, nobody else will remember this scene. Focus on what's

important for the long term: your child's safety and relationship with you."

Calm yourself.

Do you feel yourself gritting your teeth? Tensing your shoulders? Raising your voice? Take some deep breaths, calm yourself, and your child will slowly

start to calm down as well. “It’s called co-regulation,” Blair says. “It’s when you are both calm that you’ll be able to help them find other ways to show their emotions.”

Show empathy.

Children need their parents (and the other adults in their lives) to be a safe haven—a place where they can turn for understanding and comfort so they can settle and return to exploring the world.

They need you to understand their feelings.

Some children like to be held when they feel out of control; others want a hug only after calming. Some may need some time with you or to be near you in a quieter place. One helpful tip sheet, *Repairing Relationships with a Time-In* (circleofsecurity.org), puts it this way: Whenever possible follow your child’s need.

With a son who struggles to keep his emotions in check, Nicole Homick has ample opportunity to practise empathy. Drawing on her training as an early childhood educator, she’ll get down to his level, look him in the eye and say something like, “I see you’re angry. Can I help?” As she puts it, “I see these small incidents as little drops in the larger bucket of long-term goals for how I want my children to live.”

Acknowledge the physical.

“Young children need help regulating their bodies as well as their emotions,” says Dr. Carole Anne Hapchyn, an infant and early childhood psychiatrist. She’s experienced in NeuroRelational Framework, a way of describing how brains develop and function. A stressed child can be surprised when their voice shakes, heart races, legs flail and body sweats. “Understanding those responses can go a long way toward helping children learn to regulate their emotions,” she says.

Share words.

Toddlers are just beginning to learn that they have emotions, let alone how

to describe or control them. Rather than making them apologize for what they can’t understand, equip them with language. The NeuroRelational Framework uses colours as cues: green for cruising calmly along, red for sped-up agitation; blue for slowing down and withdrawing.

Colour zones have become valuable shorthand for Homick’s family, at home and at school.

“When children have ‘flipped their lid’ and tipped into that red zone, their thinking brain disengages, and all they’re using is their feeling brain,” Homick

says. “I know to be quiet then—just be a presence. ‘Connect before correct’—I run that through my mind like a mantra. That child needs compassion to get back into the green zone. Then you can work through the problem together.”

It’s crucial for children to experience the full range of emotions, Blair says. “There’s no such thing as a bad feeling. Our role is to help our children respond to their own and others’ feelings in ways that don’t hurt and to help them grow. It takes practice. And a lot of patience.” | a

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- **Healthy Parents, Healthy Children—Alberta Health Services’ resources for pregnancy and parenting in the early years.** Healthyparentshealthychildren.ca
- **Circle of Security International: Resources for raising a secure child, including *Repairing Relationships with a Time-In* tip sheet.** circleofsecurity.org



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