

When Children Experience Big Feelings

Children deal with the same uncomfortable feelings that adults do, such as jealousy, frustration, sadness, grief and anger, however they may not always have the words to describe them. The first step to help them is to not dismiss their feelings, but rather to understand and respect them.

Recognise and name feelings

Big behaviours in children are often signs of big and difficult feelings. Try to understand the feeling behind your child's behaviour and what are their possible triggers. Also, help your child identify what they are feeling by tuning into their body signs: Do they have butterflies in the stomach? Wobbly legs? Sweaty palms? Racing heart?

Ask questions that will help them understand their own emotions: 'Sounds like you are (*sad, frustrated, upset*), is that right?'

Naming feelings is the first step in helping children understand their own emotions, feel more confident and have better and more positive relationships.

Quality time together and creative activities

Very young children are still developing language and have a hard time putting overwhelming emotions into words. They might throw a tantrum, cry and use extreme words such 'I hate you,' 'I hate myself' or 'I hate everything' to express frustration and inability to cope with feelings.

Giving children your time and presence, engaging in fun and creative activities together, such as craft, drawing and painting, will not only help your child calm but will also give them means to express what is happening for them. Ask them to draw what they are feeling, what makes them sad or what makes them happy. This is a fantastic way to learn more about your child.

Validate their feelings

Before jumping onto fixing the situation and doing something to make your child feel better, explain that it is okay to feel sad or angry sometimes. It is important for children to understand that their feelings make sense and we all experience them.



Co-regulation

We are not born knowing how to sooth or calm ourselves. We need to learn what it feels like to be soothed by someone who remains calm when we are in distress or experiencing big emotions. It is called co-regulation. In essence, it is one nervous system calming another. It happens when a parent or caregiver uses their body (giving a bear hug), the tone and pitch of their voice, and their breath to safely calm their child down.

Teach emotional regulation

Deep breathing – encourage your child to do simple breathing exercises when they feel nervous or stressed.

Count to calm down – counting is another good way to distract, de-escalate and take their minds from upsetting thoughts.

Take a break – teach your child to take a little break and retreat in a safe, quiet space when they are experiencing big emotions.

Self-care

Last but not least, it is important to remember that being a parent is not an easy task, so remember to be kind to yourself. Children's behaviour often reflects what is happening with their parents. When you are well, calm and happy, chances are that your child will feel safe, be able to relax and regulate their own emotions. Do not be afraid to take time for yourself and ask for help when things get too challenging, after all, children learn to self-regulate by first co-regulating with their parents.

Seek professional help

If you are concerned about your child's capacity to regulate their emotions, or if their big behaviours are impacting their everyday life, it is a good idea to seek professional help. A GP will be able to refer your child to the most appropriate assessments and treatments.