

Parenting Together

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Managing Challenging Behavior

Toddlers and young children are beginning to realize they are their own individuals, separate from their parents and caregivers. This means that they are driven to assert themselves, to communicate their likes and dislikes, and to act independently. They are also developing the language skills that help them express their ideas, wants, and needs. At the same time, they still may not understand logic and have a hard time with waiting and self-control. In a nutshell: Sometimes, they want what they want when they want it.

Learning to Handle Strong Feelings & Practicing Self-Control

As a parent, your job involves helping your young children navigate the tide of strong emotions they are experiencing. This is no small task, because the emotional lives of toddlers and young children are complex. They are beginning to experience feelings like pride, shame, guilt, and embarrassment for the first time.

When you see behaviors that challenge you, it may mean that your child can't figure out how to express her feelings in an acceptable way or doesn't know how to get a need met. What helps your child learn is when your response shows her a different, more constructive way to manage these feelings.



Learning to cope with strong feelings happens as children develop language skills and have more experience with peers, handling disappointment, and following rules. Although children begin to develop self-control around school-age, these are skills they will practice all their lives! Here are some ideas for helping your young children begin to learn these important skill:

Talk About Feelings and How to Cope

Read books and notice aloud how the characters are feeling: "The dog is really happy that he got a bone." Share your own feelings through the day too: "I just spilled the baby's milk. I feel really frustrated! Will you help me wipe it up? Wow, it feels so good to have your help." When your child can label how he is feeling, it helps him gain control over his emotions and communicate them to others. Once your child names his feelings, you can suggest what he might do to show the feeling in another way or solve the problem. This helps him learn what to do in the future when he faces a similar challenge. For example, if he is sad because his grandparents left after a special visit, you can let him know these feelings are okay and suggest looking at photos of them or drawing them a picture.

Offer Ideas for How to Manage Strong Emotions

Young children often need guidance when it comes to figuring out how to deal with big feelings like anger, sadness, and frustration. So when your child is really angry, validate what they are experiencing: "You are really angry right now because you wanted to keep playing outside, but it was time to come inside." Then suggest ways to express that anger, like stomping their feet in an appropriate space, cuddling up in a cozy area for alone time, painting a picture, or another strategy that you feel is appropriate. What's important is to teach your child that there are many options for expressing feelings in healthy, non-hurtful ways.



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Empathize with Your Child

It's okay to let your child know that you understand the choices they are being offered are not always the ones they want. Acknowledge their feelings and help them understand by explaining the situation and offering other options.

FOR EXAMPLE:

"We have to leave now to go to school. I know you want to stay home with Mommy, but Mommy has to go to work. How about when we get home, we will finish the puzzle we started and have a yummy dinner?"

Give Your Child a Visual Aid to Make Waiting Easier

Waiting can be tough for young children, but there are ways you can help! Visual aids can prove to be very useful tools. For example, if your child has to wait for their oatmeal to cool down, show them the steam rising from the bowl. Tell them that when the steam goes away, they can test the oatmeal on a spoon to see if it is cool enough. Timers are also great tools for children, giving them something they can watch to countdown. Engage your child during these waiting moments by reading a book, singing a song together, or talking about your feelings that day ("Did anything happen that made you feel happy? sad? excited?"). Share your feelings too!



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SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING GAMES

Managing challenging emotions requires children (and adults) to stop and think before they act. Help your children practice these skills with stopping and starting games like the Freeze Game (dance when music plays, freeze when it stops) or Red Light, Green Light (hold up something red to represent an action, like clapping or jumping and hold up something green to represent stop).

The Book Nook

Sometimes I'm Bombaloo

By Rachel Vail

Horrible Bear!

By Arne Dyckman

How Do Dinosaurs Say I'm Mad? / ¿Cómo dicen estoy enojado los dinosaurios?

By Steve Anthony

Look for Ways to Help Your Child "Practice" Self-Control

There are many daily moments when you can help your child practice this skill. For example, games that require turn-taking are great for practicing how to wait and share. Rolling a ball back and forth is an example. This game gives children the chance to wait and control their impulse to grab the ball. You can also take turns hitting a soft foam ball off a tee.

Try acting out a story. Pretend play offers many chances to wait, take turns, and negotiate as children decide how the story will unfold. Another idea is playing "sharing music" where each of you chooses an instrument to play and set an egg-timer for 1 minute. When the timer goes off, switch instruments and set the timer again.

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References

I Said I Want the Red Bowl! Responding to Toddlers' Irrational Behavior

<https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/325-i-said-i-want-the-red-bowl-responding-to-toddlers-irrational-behavior>

Toddlers and Challenging Behavior: Why They Do It and How to Respond

<https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/326-toddlers-and-challenging-behavior-why-they-do-it-and-how-to-respond>

Managing Problem Behavior at Home

<https://childmind.org/article/managing-problem-behavior-at-home/>