

How to Help Young Children with Big Feelings

Recently, our lives have been changing at a rapid rate. Children and caregivers alike have had to make adjustments and manage shifts in routine. With all of these new changes occurring, there are likely going to be days where emotions run high, and times that you just don't feel, or act, like yourself. You may notice that when you are feeling stressed or unsure, your kids may be experiencing those emotions as well. That may leave you asking, "How can I help my kids cope with everything going on?" While you may not have the magical powers to make everything better for them, there are some things you can try:

1. **Remember that children do not always communicate their feelings using words.** Developmentally, young children are more likely to communicate through actions, rather than words. It may be hard for them to find the words they need in the moment, or maybe it just feels better to let it out their emotions in other ways. No matter the reason, it is important for caregivers to recognize that tantrums and difficult behaviors are ways that kids may be letting you know that things don't feel right for them.
2. **Help your child begin to recognize and label emotions.** Be open to discussing and modeling all emotions and encourage your children to share their emotions too. Practice recognizing them in different ways:
 - a. **Read books about feelings together.** The Way I Feel is a great book for talking about emotions. If you don't have a copy at home, there is a read aloud available on YouTube: <https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=you+tube+video+the+way+i+feel+bok&docid=608053809766270657&mid=800EC1BF45ACE6462F16800EC1BF45ACE6462F16&view=detail&FORM=VIRE>
 - b. **Play emotion charades.** Look at each other making different expressions and try to guess what the other is feeling, without using words.
 - c. **Use emotions as an "I Spy".** Search for and label emotion faces in books, pictures, or in tv shows.
 - d. **Help label emotions in the moment.** When you see Johnny having a tantrum, you can say, "wow you sound really frustrated." Don't worry about getting the label exactly right, kids will feel supported that you are noticing their strong feelings. A general statement of "you look really upset" will usually suffice to get the conversation started when you are not sure which emotion is being displayed.
3. **Create a calm down menu for your kids.** It is even better if they take part in creating the options.
 - a. **Take deep breaths using a catchy saying or game** (Cool the soup: Hold your cup of soup up in front of you, smell the soup, what kind is it? Take a deep breath in smelling that delicious soup; now blow on the soup to cool it down. Blow on the soup nice and gentle so it doesn't splash everywhere. It is still hot, let's do it again....)
 - b. **Use counting to calm down.** Have kids count as high as they can or backwards from 10 to 1. You can also combine counting with touch by using starfish counting (hold your hand up with all your fingers stretched apart, count and slowly trace your stretched finger up one side and down the other for all five fingers).
 - c. **Draw.** Have your kids draw their feelings, or just use drawing as a distraction tool.
 - d. **Redirect their attention to a new activity to distract and calm strong feelings.** Try play dough, building, or concentrating on a puzzle.
4. **Talk about it after.** Once strong feelings have subsided, it is important to use these experiences as learning opportunities. Talk about what coping skill they could use next time before the feelings get too big. Teach them problem solving steps to find solutions to the problems in the moment.