

Helping Children Manage Big Emotions

I am a trainer for Nonviolent Crisis Intervention which is taught in many NGPS schools. The key component staff learn is how to verbally de-escalate a student who is feeling overwhelmed and struggling to manage their emotions. I believe these same simple and effective strategies can be used at home by parents and caregivers when their child is having trouble staying calm and unable to regulate themselves.

As parents, we all do the best we can, with what we have and know at the time. However, I believe that when we know better, we do better. Our response to our child's misbehavior can have lasting impacts either good or bad. Here are a few suggestions that I teach staff, and have used with my own children.

Our ability to **regulate ourselves** and **remain calm** is crucial. If we lose control, we will likely make the situation worse and say or do things we regret. Model healthy and appropriate emotional expression.

Do not engage in a power struggle. Stick to the main issue and **downplay the challenge.** For example, the accusation that "you never let me do anything fun" can turn into a long argument or debate about all that you do for your child, or you can downplay the challenge and focus on the fact that you are not allowing them to stay out past their curfew.

Praise in public, reprimand in private. Having an audience (friends or siblings) makes it harder for your child to back down. Correcting behavior in private shows respect to your child and allows them to "save face". Be mindful of what you discuss about your child when you think they are not listening. Let your child overhear you brag about them.

Set limits with simple, clear and direct language. When a child is upset, they are unable to process information effectively. The **less words the better.** Be sure any choices you give are attainable and realistic. **Setting clear, consistent rules and consequences** helps children learn self control and personal responsibility.

Use **reflective questioning and validate what your child is feeling.** "I can see that you are angry that you are not able to stay out as late as your friend." **Name the emotion,** talk about what you are observing and help your child identify how their body feels when they feel big emotions. So much of what teachers see in students is an inability to self-regulate. To teach your child how to soothe and regulate themselves is a gift to them and those around them.

Understanding and utilizing paraverbal communication is incredibly important. Children are often more attuned to how something is said rather than the actual words. Calm, gentle tones can soothe anxiety, a firm but not angry tone can convey clear boundaries, sarcasm can damage self esteem.

Parenting is a continuous learning process and making mistakes is inevitable. **The power of apologies and asking for a “re-do”** demonstrates humility, honesty and healthy conflict resolution.

Create a “toolbox” with your child of strategies and activities for when big feelings come.

- talk it out: family members, teachers, pets etc
- physical activity: squeezing a stress ball, running, jumping, tearing up scrap paper, going outdoors, stretching, yoga
- creative activity: painting, drawing, coloring, journaling, music
- Grounding exercises: deep, rhythmic breathing, naming what they see, feel, hear, touch. Visualizing peaceful scenes or listening to soothing music
- Sensory tools: weighted blanket or stuffed animals, fidget toys, soft cozy pillow

When schools and homes create environments that model appropriate expression of feelings and teach how to manage emotions and behaviors, children are equipped with essential skills. These skills will pave the way for success at school, at home and in communities.

This article was written by Tammy Charko BA, BSW, RSW. She is the Division Social Worker for Northern Gateway Public Schools and supports and advocates for students and families to promote wellness and success in school. Tammy has been a Registered Social Worker for more than 25 years and is a mother to 4 children; 1 in high school and 3 in university.