

A toddler's guide to temper-taming

From excitement to frustration, emotions can run high in young children. Learning to stay calm in tricky situations is a valuable life skill

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YOUNG CHILDREN ARE passionate little beings, with emotions often running high. Unfortunately, they also often lack the skills and the maturity to understand and manage these feelings. Your toddler can quickly feel overwhelmed by a feeling that he cannot describe. Instead, he may act it out by crying, shouting, screaming or becoming aggressive. As they get older, toddlers need to learn about different types of feelings and find good ways to remain composed so they can express themselves using words and clear conversation. The first step on the road to this emotional intelligence is for your toddler to recognise his feelings, so that he can verbalise them correctly and deal with them appropriately. For example, if he feels angry, then he needs to recognise the feeling as anger, so he knows how to control it before he does something he may regret. For a young child, not knowing what he is feeling or how to say how he feels can lead to misunderstandings in lots of areas – at home, with friends and, later, in school situations.

Rather than allowing unhappy or bad feelings inside to fester, try to encourage your child to share them. It is good for children – and grown-ups, too – to open up about their feelings. If your child can compose himself and get his words out, then you can start acting on his needs and wants. One of the first steps is to get your child to calm down, show him that you understand what he is feeling and then gradually get him to speak to you slowly and in a way you can understand. This is something you can start from toddlerhood. Once you know what is going on, you can work towards a resolution where your child will feel happier.

There are always thoughts and beliefs behind your child's feelings and, in order to tackle them, you need to know how he feels. Your toddler may be angry because he doesn't want to share a toy, or feel frustrated because he's having so much fun at the park and you say it's time to go home. Angry outbursts, although common in

toddlers, may be the first signs that your child is having difficulty controlling his emotions. At this stage, you can help by naming and noticing his emotions. Feeling something and giving it a name – known as “processing emotions” – is all part of a child's emotional development. For example, say something like “I can see you are angry about that.” When you name emotions, it can help your toddler identify that feeling and build up his vocabulary. Phrases such as “Oh, you seem frustrated about that,” or “I am wondering if you are feeling sad about...” can help your toddler build his understanding of what's going on. His answer might be a defiant “No I'm not!” but, on some level, you're helping to give him a different perspective, or a way of phrasing how he feels.

You can also name and notice emotions through fun activities that will help your toddler recognise what other people's facial expressions mean and link them to feelings. Turn this into a game, by sitting in front of a mirror with your child and naming an emotion. You then both have to make a face of how you think that emotion would look like in the mirror. You can use any emotion: happy, sad, scared, angry, worried, and so on. This will help your toddler learn to read

facial expressions and become familiar with how you look when you are in various moods. This will also help him to become more empathetic, and tune into other people's feelings with sensitivity.

Talk to your toddler about how different emotions can feel. What words would your child use if he was feeling happy, anxious, sad, or hurt? What would his body look like? Talking about feelings and exploring body language in this way will help your toddler become more familiar with his emotions, and ultimately, help him master them in a constructive way. These simple activities combine practical and discussion strategies, but what if your toddler is a more visual learner? In this case, your child might enjoy a game where you match feelings to different situations and people. You will need a large sheet of paper with three different columns. In the first column, list all the prominent people in your child's life

“Use fun activities to help your toddler recognise feelings”





(mother, father, brother, sister, nanny, friends), then list your child's regular activities or venues he attends (for example, nursery or school, home, play dates, the park) in the next column. Finally, in the third column list the feelings your child can identify with (happy, excited, scared, sad, anxious). Now ask your child to match a feeling with each person in his life, and match a feeling to each activity by drawing a connecting line. There can be more than one emotion linked to each person, place, or situation. This exercise can be difficult for some children, so you may need to help. The overall objective is for your child to identify how he feels, but it also gives you an interesting insight into how he feels in different scenarios and with different people.

Often, a less personal approach can work well too, especially if your toddler does not like to talk about himself much. For example, you could discuss what his favourite television or cartoon characters might be feeling. Perhaps Winnie The Pooh might be feeling happy, or anxious, or even angry? By tapping into your child's interest, he may become more engaged, and should start thinking more about other people's emotions. Once your child starts school, you can also use this approach when he comes home and tells you about his day. Talking about your child's feelings and emotions can open up conversations about all sorts of other issues, such as bullying or problems at school.

ONCE YOUR CHILD is better able to identify his feelings, the next step is for him to know what to do with this new skill. Communicating feelings verbally is very important. If your child is able to articulate his feelings by saying something like "You are making me upset," or "I am upset about..." the other person (presuming they possess an equal level of emotional intelligence) can try to help him find ways of dealing with the situation. In this instance, some conciliatory words, such as "How about we find a way to calm things down so we can talk about it?" will go a long way. This is particularly important when it comes to angry emotions. Children can get angry for a number of reasons: friends letting them down, parents not allowing them to do something, brothers and sisters being annoying, being picked on, being treated unfairly, or when something does not go to plan. Children, especially toddlers, are often not great at managing their anger and therefore need your help to control it.

Children find it hard to "own" their anger; instead, their angry feelings can engulf them, and that's when it can get out of control, with furious outbursts, both physical and verbal. If your child has problems with anger management, it is important to find out what makes him angry. Being angry can show passion and determination and is a natural response when we want to defend ourselves, so let your child know that it is okay to feel angry, but that he does have to take responsibility for his anger. It's easy for your child to say "Well, he made me angry," because someone has said or done something he doesn't agree with, but how did it affect him and what can he do to quell his anger in the first place? Well, you can teach your child that he can choose to be angry, or he can choose

QUICK WAYS TO CALM

- Encourage your child to go his bedroom or outside to shout out his anger. He could also play a musical instrument loudly to vent frustrations.
- Teach your child to take a deep breath, hold it for about five seconds, and then release it slowly whenever he is starting to feel tense or angry.
- If your child is feeling angry, suggest that he pretends to put the anger away in a drawer. Afterwards, he can still talk about the anger, as long as the feelings stay in the drawer.
- Older children can write down their feelings as a way of releasing them, perhaps in the form of a letter to the person who's made them angry.
- Make sure your child acknowledges his more positive feelings, too. Encourage this by talking about happy family times you've spent together.

"Give plenty of hugs and affection to support your child"

child will acquiesce to your greater wisdom, and accept your sage words graciously. However, not all children can think in this way. If your child can't, then perhaps he has the power to stop the anger before it gets out of control. In other words, help him to recognise what is happening in his body – perhaps he feels himself getting red in the face. If your child can recognise the physiological changes in his body, this may help him know what is going to happen next so he can take alternative action. He may know if he clenches his fists, or can feel his heart beating faster, or if he feels himself going red, he is starting to get angry. Ask what he notices about his body. Alternatively, if you detect your toddler may be on the verge of a meltdown, you may be able to pre-empt it with something like: "You look like you are getting angry. Perhaps we should do something else and talk about it when you have calmed down." Being able to notice the physical changes in your child's body will hopefully mean that he can stop the anger progressing, or deteriorating into hitting, shouting or fighting.

And if it's too late to stem the anger, what next? One idea is to help your child recognise his anger and release it in a safe way that is not going to hurt anyone – verbally or physically. You could suggest your child tells someone about his angry feelings, by saying "I am angry," or, "I need to be by myself as I can feel myself getting angry," then you can acknowledge how he feels and help him relax. You can guide him to a space to calm down – perhaps to his room to draw, listen to music or lie on his bed until he feels calmer, or take him to have a run outside, or ask him to count backwards from 20.

By spending plenty of time with your child and talking to him from an early age, you will gain a better understanding of what triggers his emotions so you can help him to manage them more effectively. Keeping an open dialogue with your child is of great benefit, as is giving him plenty of cuddles and affection, so he knows that you are always there to help him with his feelings and love him, regardless of his little frustrations in life ■
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to try to be magnanimous and accept what another person is saying or doing without rising to the bait. If your child's anger is often provoked by someone else's actions, or because he does not like what someone else is saying or doing, then you can help your child change his attitude and thought process. For example, if someone says something mean to your child, he could think to himself "I don't know why he said that, but I am going to ignore him," or, "I am not sure why he did that, but he did and I am not going to give him the satisfaction of seeing me get angry."

Another example of encouraging your child to think differently is when you ask him to do something he doesn't want to do, for example, when you ask him to tidy away his toys – a common source of tantrums with toddlers. Could you help him to think "It's not worth getting angry or upset. I should just do it instead of making a fuss"? Perhaps you could suggest that he will have to do the thing he dislikes anyway, and getting angry will just prolong the job.

Of course, in an ideal world, your