

Emotional Regulation Tools for Children

Are my child's emotional outbursts normal?



As humans, we experience a wide range of emotions. Even as adults, it can be difficult to express emotions like anger, sadness, or frustration in healthy and productive ways. As such, it is not a surprise that young children experience emotional outbursts. Children are still learning how to regulate their emotions and

may not have the communication skills needed to express what they want or need. Many parents may wonder if their children's behavioral outbursts are normal, and how they can help them better identify and regulate their emotions.

Signs to Seek Professional Help

There are signs you can monitor as a parent, that can help determine when it is necessary to seek help from a mental health professional:

- ✓ Your child's outbursts are occurring past the age of which they are developmentally appropriate. It is not unusual for children under the age of 4 to have up to 9 tantrums or emotional outbursts that last about 5 to 10 minutes every week. Most children will outgrow this pattern of behavior by kindergarten, but it is also developmentally expected that children will experience some emotional outbursts or tantrums up to the age of 7 or 8 years old.
- ✓ Your child's behavior is harmful or dangerous to themselves or others. It is important to give our children the space they need to express their emotions. However, if their behaviors are physically harmful (i.e., self, peers, siblings, parents), it may be time to seek professional help.
- ✓ Teachers or staff at your child's school have informed you about disruptive behavior. As children spend a majority of their time in school, teachers can provide valuable insight about how your child is regulating his/her emotions and expressing feelings.
- ✓ Your child's emotional sensitivity is interfering with social interactions. You may notice that playdates with other children often end in conflict, or your child is having difficulty making or keeping friends at school.
- ✓ Your child's difficulty controlling his/her temper or emotions is causing guilt or shame. All of the above factors can harm children's self-esteem and ultimately make them feel badly about themselves.

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Helping Children Identify Their Emotions

Some children learn that acting out is one way to get what they want. Providing your child with the tools and language they need to communicate their needs will reinforce healthy expression of emotion and reduce tantrums.

- ❑ **Educate your children about the different emotions they may experience.** Take special care to not label emotions like anger, frustration, or sadness as negative. Although we want our children to be happy, it is important for children to understand that it is normal to experience a range of emotions and that all emotions should be acknowledged.
- ❑ **Act as a model with your own feelings.** Describe to your children how you experience emotions and what you like to do to manage them. For example, if you as a parent are feeling frustrated or had a difficult day at work, explain to your child what you are experiencing, and identify how you will take care of yourself: *“Today I was really busy at work and didn’t have any time to rest. I am going to do a quiet meditation to calm my feelings down.”*
- ❑ **Validate your child’s feelings.** Show that you are listening and ask questions to ensure you have a proper understanding of what is bothering your child and what he/she believes is causing the distress. Showing that you accept his/her feelings can help your child effectively cope and avoid explosive behaviors.

How can mental professionals help?

Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)
CBT is a type of therapeutic treatment that helps people learn how to identify and change emotionally distressing thought patterns that have a negative influence on behavior and emotions. CBT for kids can help them develop emotional awareness, communication skills, coping skills for managing big feelings, and apply behavioral principles to foster meaningful change.

Parent Management Training (PMT)
PMT is a type of intervention where parents typically meet with a mental health professional without the child present. In these sessions, parents learn skills to deal with challenging behaviors more effectively. PMT strategies help parents and their children work together to identify the problem causing the emotional distress and mutually agree upon the steps or solutions to alleviate it.

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