

## How can I help my child cope with big feelings?

SickKids Centre for Community Mental Health has worked with lots of families whose children struggle to manage big feelings. Many families who have worked with staff at SickKids CCMH have found these suggestions helpful. Keep in mind your child's age and abilities when applying these strategies. Give them a try and feel free to add your own!

**Reflect on your own feelings.** The key to helping your child regulate their emotions is to regulate your own emotions. To understand your child better, it is important to understand yourself. Everyone is more comfortable with some emotions than others. Try asking yourself:

- Which emotions do I have most difficulty dealing with in my child?
- How do I model handling difficult emotions for my child?
- What is triggered in me by my child's emotion? Am I acknowledging these feelings, or do I sweep them away? Check out this link for an animated example: <https://bit.ly/2CkyLfU>



**Help your child recognize their emotions.** This is the first step in tackling big feelings. Try these tips to help you and your child get ahead of big feelings and big reactions.

- Identify situations that result in tantrums or emotional explosions in your child. Does your child get angry in response to your own reactions, or do they throw a tantrum when they lose a game? Identifying these situations can help you and your child prepare for them.
- Help your child recognize how their body feels when they're having big feelings. Do they feel hot or shaky? When they learn to recognize these signs, they will find it easier to go to a quiet space before escalating their behaviour.

**Help your child express themselves.** Often, your child might be having an outburst because they are having trouble expressing what they're really feeling. Acknowledging and respecting your child's feelings can help them express themselves in other ways than with big reactions.

- Actively listen to your child and reflect their feelings back to them. Often, children don't have the words to express how they're feeling, and it's important for caregivers to do this for them. Try using statements like "It makes sense that you're feeling angry" or "I understand that you're having a tough time right now." Labelling your child's feelings for them will help them learn to label their own feelings in the future, as well as feel heard and understood.
- In a quieter, less emotional moment, ask your child what they need. For older children, you may say "I understand why losing a game makes you angry, is there another way you could express your anger when you feel that way?" For younger children, try to provide suggestions of what they might need. For example, try saying something like "What do you need right now? Would you like me to sit with you and listen, or would you like some alone time?"

**Teach your child relaxation techniques.** Even when you recognize big feelings and acknowledge them, your child may still have a difficult time calming down. Try these tips to help them relax their bodies and minds when they're feeling out of control.

- Make sure your child has a quiet space in your home that they can go to when they feel themselves losing control. This should be somewhere safe where they (continued, over)

can't hurt themselves or damage the room. They can stay there and draw, journal or listen to music until they feel calm and ready to come back.

- For young children, try the “Turtle Technique.” Ask them to imagine that they have a turtle shell that they can crawl into. Tell them to take three deep breaths and say to themselves “Stop, take a deep breath, calm down.” Help your child continue to focus on their breathing and pushing the air into their arms and legs until they feel relaxed enough to come out of their shell. Older children can try other breathing techniques like relaxing their muscle groups one at a time or counting their breaths.

**Provide a consistent and calm environment.** Your child’s environment can be a powerful tool in helping them learn to identify and manage their big feelings.

- Many caregivers find that a consistent environment helps their child feel calmer. Try having a relatively predictable daily schedule and clear household rules. This will help avoid confusion and help your child feel more calm and secure.
- Talk about your own feelings. Setting an example for your child will help them learn the framework to talk about their feelings in a constructive way. Use language your child can understand and label the emotion. For example, “I’m feeling frustrated because of the traffic today, I’m going to take some deep breaths to feel better and we can listen to the radio together.” You may also share with them how your body feels when you are feeling frustrated.
- Your child may like to hear that you had a similar experience when you were their age. If it feels comfortable and safe for you to share, this may help them feel understood.
- Encourage your child to talk about their feelings and don’t minimize them. Be careful not to dismiss their feelings by saying “Don’t be sad” or rolling your eyes. Instead, show your child that their feelings are valid and worth sharing with you by listening closely.
- If your child doesn’t feel like talking about their feelings, have them try writing a letter or drawing a picture about how they feel.
- Model the kind of behaviour you hope to see in your child. It’s okay to lose your cool sometimes, the key is how you handle yourself next. For example, if you’ve burned something on the stove, try taking a minute away from the situation to take a breath. Taking that moment to calm down and let your child know “I got a bit overwhelmed and needed a moment to relax” will help them learn how to manage their own emotions in the future.

## Further resources

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Check out these links for more helpful hints on how to manage big feelings.

1. Kids Matter: Helping Children to Manage Feelings <https://bit.ly/2NO0MOI>
  2. Kids Health: Talking About Your Feelings <https://bit.ly/2CnsXST>
  3. Kids Health: Helping Kids Cope with Stress <https://bit.ly/2wLvEs8>
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