

MIND in the Making

The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs

PRESCRIPTIONS FOR LEARNING

Preventing Meltdowns

Promoting the Life Skill of Taking on Challenges in Preschoolers

Five Strategies That Work in Moving from Managing Children's Behavior to Promoting Life Skills

Question: My four-year-old is constantly crying and melting down when things don't go the way she had hoped. How can I help her respond to these situations without both of us completely falling apart?

At this age, your child is learning to set goals—that is, to determine what she wants. She is also learning self control—to regulate her behavior and her emotions to achieve these goals and to manage when things don't go the way she wants. These skills, which call on Executive Functions of the brain, develop most rapidly during the preschool years and represent a milestone in her development, though it doesn't always feel that way when you are on the receiving end of a meltdown.

It is natural for parents to have an emotional response in these moments. Part of helping her deal with disappointments is managing your own response at the same time as you help her, which you can do by promoting the life skill of Taking on Challenges.

When it comes to helping your child, Megan Gunnar of the University of Minnesota, a foremost authority on stress and coping in children, has found through her research that:

Parents and other [important people in the child's life] are powerful stress buffers. The mere presence of a trusted parent or other person to whom the child is attached can completely block the body's stress response, even if children still seem frightened or anxious. There is something very powerful about secure emotional attachments. They release chemicals that help repair the effects of stress and/or block the production of stress chemicals in the first place.

- 1. Be there for your child.** When your child feels safe and supported, her confidence in her ability to manage frustration and to take on challenges grows. Your encouragement, through your words and actions, shows your child that you believe in her, even when things are hard.
 - Let your child know that you understand her feelings and that it is okay to feel sad or angry. During one of these meltdowns, try to use a calm voice, get down to your child's level and say something like: "You really want to have my phone, but I can't let you play with it; and I can't let you throw it when you get angry. I do know how angry you feel."
 - If you can suggest alternatives, do so. "You also like to play ball, so let's throw a ball back and forth and see how many times we can keep from dropping it."
 - Provide non-verbal support, too. You may need to hold her to keep her from hurting you or other objects, but do it in as loving a way as you can. Hugs, kisses or a pat on the back all send positive and caring messages to your child. Sometimes just being with your child while she is upset—without words or actions—is enough.
- 2. Practice the skill of Taking On Challenges for yourself.** Think about these difficult moments with your child as an opportunity for you to take on your own challenge. Think of some strategies to use in the moment to help you calm down and think clearly. Your child learns from your example.

The American Academy of Pediatrics suggest that when children's behavior pushes parents to their emotional limits, that they try to maintain a sense of humor, take time away from the situation if they can and have others they can turn to for help and support.

- The research of Ethan Kross of the University of Michigan has found that looking at an upsetting emotional experience from what he calls a “self-distanced perspective”—looking at oneself from a distance—helps them cope with their negative feelings more effectively. Think of this as watching your situation happen on a TV show.
- If you feel yourself getting angry or raising your voice, take some deep breaths before responding. If you can, take a break from the situation, saying something like: “It seems like you are angry that I told you that you can’t have a cookie before dinner. Your face is red and you are yelling. I am going to give you some space so you can calm down, and then we can talk about what snacks you can have.”
- Make sure to have your own support system. In one of his studies, Nathan Fox of the University of Maryland has found that when parents have people to turn to—people on whom they can rely when they feel stressed—that positively affects their children’s social development. Reach out to friends, family, colleagues and other parents to help you cope.

Make sure that the people you turn to are non-judgmental and know what it’s like to walk in your shoes. Also, make sure that they help you feel good about yourself even when you are upset, and that they help you recover and be your best self.

3. Prepare your child for any changes in the routine in advance, if possible. Young children crave predictability and routine. It helps them feel in control. So, when plans change, as they so often do in life, it can be upsetting for your child.

- Make sure to prepare your child as early as possible for changes in the schedule. This gives her time to make sense of what is going to happen and get ready, hopefully preventing a future breakdown and making it easier for you.
- Explain to her what is happening and why. If possible, let her have some choice in the new plan: “Today, we were supposed to visit your grandma, but she is not feeling well and doesn’t want us to get sick. We will see her next weekend. Do you want to draw her a picture or make her a card to help her get better?”

Adele Diamond of the University of British Columbia reminds parents to:

Help children believe in themselves. They need to know you believe in them, that you fully expect them to succeed ... [It is] important to have the attitude that there is no question that you are going to master this.

4. Celebrate your child’s hard work. The research of Carol Dweck of Stanford University reveals that children are much more likely to try something hard if you praise their effort: “You worked hard at going on the slide” or their strategies: “You could go down the slide because you held on to the railing,” instead of praising their personality or intelligence by saying things like: “You are so smart!”

- Make your praise specific to what your child is doing like: “You are working so hard to put all of the pieces in the puzzle!” instead of a general comment like: “Good job!”

Megan Gunnar of the University of Minnesota has found that:

Mild stress can be positive. Getting upset because you can’t get what you want right now ... can be good for development. These experiences often cause a brief increase in heart rate and activation of other fight/flight systems. But if children are supported and learn to cope with these hassles and upsets, these experiences can have positive effects on development.

5. Help your child come up with new strategies for dealing with frustration and disappointment. Sometimes plans change at the last minute. To help you and your child deal with these times, brainstorm together for ideas to help her manage her feelings when things don’t go her way. When children come up with their own ideas for Taking on Challenges, they are more likely to try them out.

While it is best for your child to come up with solutions, here are some ideas you can suggest to your child:

- Come up with a phrase that your child can repeat to herself when she is feeling upset like: “Breathe in, breathe out,” “Don’t give up,” or “Try and try again.”
- Offer your child opportunities for creative expression. Encourage her to draw, write, move and sing until she feels calm. Creativity can be a great outlet for difficult feelings.

- Stanley Turecki, author of *The Difficult Child*, suggests asking your child to think of a color that she feels when she is upset, like red. Then ask your child to think of a color that reminds her of feeling calm, like blue. The next time she is close to breaking down, remind her that she can think hard about her calm color.

These five strategies will promote the life skill of Taking on Challenges and move from managing children's behavior to promoting life skills in fun and doable ways.

Taking on Challenges: Life is full of stresses and challenges. Children who are willing to take on challenges (instead of avoiding them or simply coping with them) do better in school and in life.

Mind in the Making (MITM), at The Bezos Family Foundation, is an unprecedented effort to share the science of children's learning with the general public, families and professionals who work with them. Based on *Mind in the Making: The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs* (HarperCollins, 2010) by Ellen Galinsky, Chief Science Officer at The Bezos Family Foundation, its mission is to promote Executive Function life skills in adults and through them in children in order to keep the fire for learning burning brightly in all of us.

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