

Big Feelings: Support for Toddlers and Children

Curiosity & Limit Setting

Ensuring that you are supporting your child's desire to learn while also teaching them about what is safe and appropriate important. To do this, you can...

- Be clear and consistent about expectations you have for your child.
- Hold firm boundaries while giving choices for what they can do.
Ex: Instead of saying "No, we're not reading a book," try "We're going to the grocery store right now. We can read a book another time" or "We're going to the grocery store. You can pick a book to bring with you in the car."
- Validate your child's feelings while still holding boundaries.
Ex: "It is so sad to leave our friends and it is time to go;" "I get angry too when I have to stop doing something fun and we don't hit;" "New places are scary and we're going to be brave and go inside."
- Create space for adventure and choices in smaller ways. Allow your child to pick which way to walk, where to play at the playground, or what to cook for dinner. Try offering choices instead of "nos."
- Be curious about what your child enjoys. Embracing their curiosity helps them feel supported.
- Find time to connect with your child when things aren't stressful to build a positive relationship with them. This creates a ground of trust for more effective discipline in the family.

Modeling

Your child will have big feelings and hard days. Managing your own nervous system during this time will help them learn how to regulate their feelings.

To do this, you can...

- Take care of yourself. Get enough sleep. Go on walks, take breaks, and drink water.
- Find what helps you feel better when you're stressed and name that you are helping yourself regulate (i.e. "Wow I feel really overwhelmed right now. I'm going to shake my arms out a bit to feel better," "This feels intense. I'm going to take a deep breath").
- Deep breaths are so important. When you or your child are overwhelmed with intense feelings, taking big breaths helps our bodies get through. Your child will notice your breathing and start to match your tempo. See if you can exhale longer than you inhale!
- Create a calm down space in your house where anyone in your family can go when they are having big emotions. Go here with your child if they need it to take a break.
- Remember that your child is learning so much from you. This doesn't mean that you must be perfect. It is just a reminder that you are teaching them with both your actions and your words. If you take care of yourself, they will learn to do this too.

The Importance of Quality Time

Your child will learn from connection with you, and this will serve as a foundation for their health in the future.

- Quality time should include a joint activity your child chooses and is interactive. Your child gets to direct this play time and you follow along with their adventures.
- Pick a specific time of the week or month and label it as “special time.” Keep the amount of time you play consistent (this can be based on how much time you have- 10 to 30 minutes usually works well).
- Have your child set a timer to signify the end of special play time and give them a 5-minute warning before it ends.
- This time should not be used as a punishment or reward. We all have hard days, and this quality time should be consistent for a child, regardless of how “good” of a day they’ve had.
- As your child ages, they may want to fill this with different activities. No matter what, this shared time together will help support them and grow your relationship.

Ways to Take a Break

Sometimes children need help with taking a break and helping their bodies feel better again. As a parent you can help them with this process by offering options.

- Encouraging the child to ground in their bodies by taking deep breaths, noticing 5 things in the room, finding everything of one color, or watch a sand timer.
- Use temperature changes like getting a bag of ice from the freezer or holding one ice cube until it melts
- Try offering self-soothing or distracting techniques to help the child with challenging feelings such as stuffed animal, silly putty, calming blanket, snow globes, or big hugs.

Extra Help

If you’re feeling stuck and need some ideas, it can be helpful to look to some visual cues through books, games, or apps for support. Here are some we’ve found to be helpful.

- Books: The Way I Feel, Little Monkey Calms Down, What if I Know My Feelings, Alphabreaths: The ABCs of Mindful Breathing, Grumpy Monkey, The Color Monster, Ruby Finds a Worry, Me and My Fear, The Snurtch, When Sadness is at Your Door, Mindfulness for Little Ones
- Activities: Calm Down Yoga, Animal Chat (Feelings cards), Emotion Wheels
- Apps and Websites: Big Little Feelings, Zero to Three, AAP Healthy Children