

Strategies for Challenging Behaviors



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We're all Human... It is a strange paradox that the people closest to us often frustrate us the most. As a parent, our job is to help young children navigate the tide of strong emotions that are part of the early years where they are a lot like teenagers. Their feelings, at times swing across the pendulum being happy when they get an ice cream cone but then having a melt down when it drips into their hands. As parents (and humans!) our emotions can get the best of us, so we need to figure out how to keep our emotions in check when we also get frustrated.

If this sounds familiar...

- She gets so angry that she might throw a toy
- He cannot seem to settle for a substitute—if the orange pajamas are in the wash, he is inconsolable (even though you have offered the red ones, the polka dot ones, the striped ones, etc.)

This might be happening: When you see challenging behavior, it usually means that your child can't figure out how to express their emotions in an acceptable way. Tantrums and outbursts are a form of communication, and as parents it is our job to help children see a more constructive way to communicate.


In the heat of the moment...

- Look for the positive qualities in your child
- Taking a breath and thinking about something special about your child can help you make a challenging situation more manageable.


And Longer Term... Our Top 10

1. **Discuss by reading books.** Focus on the feelings of the characters as you read any favorite book. Ie: "I wonder how the dog feels that his friend took his bone?"
2. **After a child can name their feelings, you can suggest ways to feel better or solve the problem.** This will help for future challenges. For example, if your child is sad because grandma and grandpa just left after a visit, you can suggest, looking at photos of them, drawing pictures or facetimeing them to let them know.



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3. **Help your child figure out how to deal with feelings.** Young children need guidance when it comes to figuring out how to deal with feelings. So when your child is angry, validate these feelings and tell them what you think they are feeling. “You seem really angry now because I said no more television, what can we do with these angry feelings? Jump up and down, hit a soft cushion, have some alone time.” It is so important for healthy development that your child is given many choices for ways to express feelings
 4. **Empathize with your child** to help them understand that the choices being offered are not the ones your child wants. ie: We have to leave now and go to Meghan’s house, I know you want to stay home but staying home is not a choice today. When we get home we will finish the puzzle we started”
 5. **Some children need visuals to understand** and some transition time. For instance, “In five minutes when the timer goes off it will be time to take a bath.” Or if you need 10 minutes to finish a task before you can attend to their needs, set a timer so your child can keep track or if you need to help your child share give both children a time to show how long one of them has to wait for their turn. It is also helpful to additionally empathize and just say I know it is hard to wait for your turn.
 6. **Use every day moments.** For example, games that require turn-taking are great for practicing how to wait and share. Rolling a ball back and forth is an example. This game gives children the chance to wait and control their impulse to grab the ball.
 7. **Pretend play** offers many chances to wait, take turns, and negotiate as children decide how the story will unfold. Another idea is playing “sharing music” where each of you chooses a pretend instrument to play and set a timer for 1 minute. When the timer goes off, switch.
 8. **Children like to be in control.** So when you want them to do something, offer them choices but with the same goal at the end. For instance: Brushing teeth: you can do it in the bathroom or kitchen, or eating at the table: “it is dinner time, you can sit in this seat or that seat.” Both of these examples show that your child will be encouraged to do what you want but give them the choices they need to have a sense of control.
 9. **Children don’t like to wait.** They believe the world revolves around them, and in reality most people don’t like to wait, they want their needs to be met quickly. To help your children develop tolerance for the feelings of impatience you need to teach them how. One way is not to always drop everything as soon as your child asks for something. Allow your child to feel the unpleasantness of waiting. For example, by not giving your child a drink immediately, your child will get to practice managing impatience.
 10. **Celebrate your child’s appropriate behavior.** When your child shows an act of kindness or resilience use the opportunity to acknowledge it. Reinforcing the positive behavior will go a long way in your child repeating that behavior. ie: “it was so kind of you to give the toy to your sister. You made her very happy.”

Remember, you are not going to be able to help your children manage their behavior overnight. No doubt there will be times when they misbehave, no matter how hard you have



worked on it. They are children. But if you continue to focus on these strategies sooner or later the lessons will sink in.

As parents, to help this along, we need to also channel our emotions and talk about them openly so we can help our wonderful children do the same.