



How to Help Your Screaming Child - a Parent's Guide to Emotional Regulation

Most of us have witnessed a screaming child who has felt completely out of control. Some of us have seen this in our own kids, while others have spectated from the side-lines as an unknown child has had a 'meltdown' in the grocery store. (Worse still of course is when it IS our screaming child melting down in the grocery store). It's like watching an internal tornado gain intensity and wreak havoc within our child leaving them hysterical. Sometimes there's a build up, at other times the emotional storm seems to blow in without warning, rendering the child suddenly unresponsive to logic or reasoning. I describe it like this, not just because this is how it appears, but because it's useful to imagine what it would feel like to be affected by a mini-tornado-for-one - completely terrifying. And just as we would never expect a child caught up in a powerful tornado to be able to 'calm themselves down', a child with overwhelming emotions finds it distressingly impossible too.

The reason for this is that the ability to calm down from strong emotional states (clinically known as 'emotional regulation') requires the development of specific brain pathways which take years to establish.

We know that when a child learns to talk, they first utter sounds before full words and later sentences. Similarly, the capacity for emotional regulation develops in stages too:

1. Initially the parent needs to calm their infant's distress for them by doing things like holding them close, patting, rocking etc.

2. Later feelings can be managed with the help of the parent (co-regulation of emotions)
3. Finally the child can manage their feelings on their own (self-regulation of emotions)

In reality, even as adults we might move between stages 2 and 3 depending on how well we're coping at the time, how much sleep we've had and how stressful the trigger is. This means that most of the time we can calm ourselves down but at other times we still need the help of close adults to help comfort and contain our distress.

So what do we do when our child has a meltdown? Of course, in an ideal world we predict and prevent meltdowns before they happen. Once your child's feelings overwhelm them however, these are the steps which can best help your child:

1. **Take a deep, calming breath.** Remind yourself that your screaming child is out of control and needs your help to deal with more than their brain is wired to handle.
2. **Stay with your child.** Sometimes parents send their young child to 'time-out' with the instruction to calm themselves down. Not only is this a neurologically impossible task but this rejection often makes the child feel more upset so their distress lasts longer. Your child needs lots of help 'co-regulating' their emotions before they can learn to manage their feelings on their own. This is called 'time-in' rather than 'time-out'.
3. **Save talking until later.** Your child cannot concentrate on your words while they remain upset so keep talking to a minimum. Simply say in a calm reassuring tone, "You're really upset. I'll help you calm down. Lets slow our breathing down, cuddle in, you'll feel better soon".
4. **Breathe with your child.** Show them how to take slow deep breaths. If they try to shout or scream about their plight, simply reassure them that you'll listen to what they have to say but first you're going to help them calm down.
5. **Debrief.** Once your child is calm it's useful to have a quick chat about what just happened. You can start the conversation by saying "Gee, you must have felt really angry then. You did well calming down but I wonder what we could have done instead so that you didn't have to feel so upset". Listen to your child but be firm with your limits. "I understand that you felt angry because your sister grabbed the toy you were playing with, but what might be a better way to ask for your toy back next time?" Children need to learn how to manage tricky situations but they can only do this once they're feeling calm.

When we stay with our child and help to co-regulate their strong emotions we teach them that feelings, however big, are manageable. Perhaps more importantly, we teach our children that they can rely on us to support them when they feel like they're losing their grip.

Even in the grocery store.