



Developing Skills to Manage Strong Emotions



It is normal to experience strong emotions; everyone feels fearful, sad, angry and overwhelmed sometimes. Most adults have the maturity and life skills to deal with these emotions in healthy ways. But children haven't yet developed this ability, and parents have to step in to help their younger kids or teenagers express and cope with their feelings.

Here are a few things to keep in mind when teaching your child how to effectively manage strong emotions:

Choose Some Strategies

There is no one "right" strategy for managing emotions because different things work for different people. The key is to help your child figure out which strategy will work for them in a particular situation. The best way to choose a strategy is to determine, both from observing your child and discussing the problem together, what he or she needs right now.

- **If your child needs to release emotion:** This is a situation where so much anger or sadness or worry has built up in your child that he or she needs to do something to let off some steam. Two kinds of strategies work best here: a physical release and a nonphysical release. A physical release can come from exercising, tearing up paper, punching a pillow or even just breathing in and out slowly. Nonphysical releases can involve journaling, talking to a friend or creating art or music.
- **If your child needs to make emotions visible or concrete:** Unlike a physical wound, emotional pain can be hard to see or explain, and it's sometimes difficult for kids to express just how badly they're feeling inside. When this happens, they need to somehow "convert" their emotions into something visible or tangible. Having your child draw, paint or scribble (especially with colors that match his or her mood), write poetry or use metaphorical language, or put Band-Aids on their body to symbolize the pain can be effective ways to do this.
- **If your child needs to regain a sense of control:** When a problem or a difficult situation has sent your child's emotions into a frenzy,

[continued >](#)

both you and your child might feel like life is spinning out of control. The best approach in these situations is to help your child focus on things he or she does have control over. These might include activities your child is good at or that keep him or her busy, like tackling a to-do list, cleaning or organizing clothes. Just accomplishing some simple tasks can give children a sense of empowerment that can help them push through times of feeling helpless and out of control.

- **If your child needs to take a break:** Sometimes, feelings just become too much, and your child might just need to step back. One option is to have your child do soothing or relaxing activities like taking a hot shower, lighting a scented candle, taking a short nap or focusing on deep breathing. Another option is to use distractions like watching a movie, playing a game, reading a book, surfing the Internet, listening to music or shooting some hoops.
- **If your child needs to feel something:** Some kids get so overwhelmed with a challenge or problem that they start feeling nothing. Their bodies shut down their emotional pain receptors, and everything goes a bit numb for them. In these situations, guide your child toward activities that can help create physical sensations. These might include holding an ice cube, splashing cold water on his or her face, lightly snapping a rubber band on the wrist, tensing and relaxing muscles, or watching something really funny.

Practice!

Learning to manage strong emotions is like learning anything else: To get good at it, you have to practice. Consider teaching and having your child try strategies like deep breathing or tensing and relaxing muscles when he or she is calm. Practicing during a neutral time increases the chances that your child will remember to use a strategy in the heat of an emotional moment.

- **Talk about what strategies your kids have tried.** Engage in brief, informal conversations about what techniques your child has tried in the past and how they worked or did not work. These conversations can happen at any time (in the car, sitting in a waiting room, during and/or between the activities of the day). Remind your child that the tools he or she uses won't work 100% of the time, and encourage him or her to keep trying. This is a good opportunity to normalize your child's feelings and let him or her know that everyone experiences strong emotions.
- **Model healthy habits.** Kids watch what their parents do, and they learn a lot from seeing how their parents manage strong emotions effectively. Verbalize the strategies that you use – like how you stay organized and manage stress – to highlight what works. If you are having trouble managing your own stress or responsibilities, it may help to seek assistance so you can learn more effective ways to cope and manage.

➞ **For more information** or to make an appointment at the Boys Town Center for Behavioral Health, call **531-355-3358**.

Visit **BoysTown.org/Parenting** for more information from the parenting experts at Boys Town.

