



**Dr. Richard Formica, Ph.D.**

LICENSED PSYCHOLOGIST & PARENTING EXPERT  
parenting@drrichardformica.com | 201 384-7457

## HOW TO HELP YOUR CHILD DEVELOP EMOTIONAL REGULATION

So many parents who consult with me share their pain and frustration that their child cannot get control of their emotions. I hear complaints and worried statement about their children's difficulties in moderating and regulating their emotions.

Here are the kind of worried remarks I hear:

1. *"He tantrums and can't stop";*
2. *"She screams and screams when I say no";*
3. *"When he is angry, he will kick me or throw something";*
4. *"When she doesn't want to go somewhere, she will kick the car seat over and over."*

Parents often start by **yelling** at their child. This almost always escalates into more and more shouting, back and forth.

Then parents try **threatening punishments**. This usually does not work either.

Then parents read parenting books and try to follow the advice given to them about listening with empathy to try to understand what their child is really upset about. This is actually very good advice, but it often doesn't work well at that moment because **their child is way too upset to talk** and is primarily interested in either discharging emotion or getting their way.

Finally, in exasperation, I get a call from the beleaguered and besieged parents requesting help.

Here are some of the principles I recommend to parents for these situations:

- 1. Get full control of your own emotions.** This first step – **getting full control of your emotions** – is simple but not easy. For some parents it boils down to taking a break from the action and engaging in calming themselves through slow breathing or making themselves a cup of tea. For others, they must dig a bit into themselves to figure out what from their own lives, experiences, attitudes or past is being activated. Ask yourself: *“what buttons are being pushed?”*
- 2. Help your child develop his or her own capacity for self-calming.** Helping a child develop the capacity to self-calm may seem impossible to many parents. It is indeed very difficult. But it is not impossible. The most important approach for a parent is this: **stay calm, and do NOT engage.** Do NOT debate. Do NOT explain. Do NOT answer questions. Do NOT argue. Do NOT threaten. **STOP engaging until the child finds a way to settle themselves.** During this time, actively encourage the child to find some way to blow off steam, or to find settling activities. It might involve the child kicking a soccer ball in the back yard. It might involve the child reading. It might involve the child taking a bath or taking a walk. Encourage any healthy activity which helps your child settle.
- 3. Use a “When-Then” Approach.** (*“When you are calm and settled, I will sit down with you and try to understand what is upsetting you.”*) Do NOT promise to give the child what they were fussing for. Just offer to sit down and to try to understand them **AFTER** they are fully settled. Until then, stop engaging in all ways. Encourage your child, by example more than by words, to walk away from the battle and to settle themselves. If you do so,

they will eventually follow your lead.

**4. Engage in active listening and use clarifying questions with your child.**

Paraphrase what they tell you and reflect back the emotions you hear when they speak. (*“It seems like you are hurt and angry that I said no to your request.”*) Once your child feels emotionally heard, use sincere clarifying questions to better understand what about the situation upset your child. (*“I understand you were hurt and angry. Are you mad because you so want that ice cream, or are you more upset because it seems like I said yes to your sister yesterday and it feels unfair to you?”*)

**5. Understand the concept of “co-regulation.”**

Co-regulation is the process by which parents help their children “settle,” starting in infancy and continuing throughout the development of the child to adulthood. When a mother picks up a crying baby and rocks and soothes that baby, the mother’s calmness gradually regulates the baby’s nervous system. The same is true with children of all ages. Stay calm and extend gentle efforts to understand your child’s upset. The calm state which you transmit to them will eventually transform their state. However, if you carry on and complain to the child that their agitation is bothersome or frustrating, you will only throw fuel on your child’s emotional fire.

**6. Apply collaborative problem-solving with your child.**

After you and your child are calm and you have understood their feeling and the reasons behind it, move on to collaborative problem-solving. Help your child begin to develop ideas to use when they have similar difficult or frustrating moments in the future, without resorting to raging, screaming, whining, crying, or tantrum behavior. Work as a team with your child. Ask them for their ideas. Offer yours for consideration, but not as instructions to be obeyed. (*“The next time you want candy and I say no, how can we go forward without you*

*screaming and me arguing?”) Don’t be afraid to be personal and kind. (“I like to give you treats but I cannot give you treats before dinner. But I do understand that you are hungry and that candy looks great. How can we create a solution that works for both of us?”)*

ABOVE ALL, keep in mind this simple but profoundly true maxim I have developed for my patients:

**A CHILD CANNOT DEVELOP THE ABILITY TO LIMIT THEIR OWN EMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIORAL REACTIONS UNLESS THEIR PARENT CALMLY AND QUIETLY SETS LIMITS ON THE CHILD’S DYSFUNCTIONAL EMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIORAL REACTIONS.**

Richard Formica, Ph.D.  
Psychologist and Parenting Expert  
Phone: 201 384-7457  
Email: [parenting@drrichardformica.com](mailto:parenting@drrichardformica.com)