

3 Steps to Stay Calm When Your Child Isn't

"Seeing your child in distress, and particularly if that distress is directed at you, is the most dysregulating experience there is. Wild, out of control thoughts of epic disaster come unbidden. Rage, self doubt and other destructive feelings quickly cloud your thinking. What if you could work to push those thoughts aside, and in a way analogous to meditation, concentrated on being in the moment, concentrated on remembering to breathe? It would help you focus on your child, and on the immediate task before you rather than its global implications."
–Claudia Gold



When our child acts out, lashes out, or is simply in distress, it's natural for us to panic. We're plunged into "fight, flight or freeze" because it feels like an emergency. And if our child's distress is directed at us, then he looks like the enemy.

But it's natural for children to have big feelings, and to act them out. If we "lose it" when our child gets upset, we give her the message that her feelings aren't permitted, which doesn't help her learn to regulate her emotions. Worse, we're saying that we can't control ourselves until she controls herself! Whether she's 5 or 15, that's not what we want to model.

Of course, we know that we can handle any parenting situation better from a state of calm. But when we're in the grip of strong emotions, we aren't thinking. We can't help ourselves.

Or can we? What if there were three steps that would help you shift back into calm, AND keep your child from getting upset as often? There are.

STEP 1: Get Your Own Emotions Regulated

STOP, DROP, BREATHE

STOP, DROP whatever else you're doing and BREATHE deeply.

Reduce the pressure

Remind yourself that there is no emergency. No one is dying.

Change Your Thoughts

Say a little mantra in your mind: "She's acting like a child because she IS a child. I'm the grown-up here."

Physically release your tension

Notice where you're holding tension in your body and shake it out. Take a deep breath and blow it out. Make a loud (but nonthreatening) sound. Often, water helps ground us. Hold your hands under running water, or get a drink of water.

Be Here Now.

If you can bring yourself into the present moment, your upset will drop away. That's because when we're upset, we're actually over-reacting -- we're triggered from the past ("My parents me for would have smacked saying

such a thing!") or frightened of the future ("My child is going to be a sociopath!"). In this moment, if you can let all that go, there's no emergency.

Step 2: Shift the Energy

Make things emotionally safe.

Say *"We're having a hard time, Sweetie. Let's try a Do-Over."*

Empathize.

Acknowledge your child's perspective. *"Seems like you want _____."*

Find the common ground.

"You need _____ And I need _____. What can we do to solve this?"

Connect.

In this moment, what action would be healing? Anything else can wait.

Help your child get emotionally regulated.

Kids usually do this best by crying in the safety of our arms/presence. Now that you're calm, you can offer your compassion to help him feel safe enough to cry. Breathe your way through this, reminding yourself that his tears are his way of opening his heart to reconnecting.

Step 3: Learn the Lesson

Learn.

When you're calm, reflect on what you can learn from what happened. How can you support yourself to stay more emotionally regulated? (Allow more time, get more sleep, fewer commitments, see things from your child's perspective?)

Teach.

Later, when you and your child feel calm and connected, say *"We had a hard time today, didn't we? I'm sorry I got upset. I guess I was worried. I am working hard not to yell. What can each of us do differently next time?"*

Change.

If this is a recurring situation, make a list of possible solutions and start trying them. Life is too short to endure the same problems over and over again.

You won't remember these steps in the heat of the moment. Why not print out a little cheat sheet and carry it around with you? A few months of practice, and you won't even remember the last time you lost your temper.