

Understanding & Responding to Tantrums

With Connection, Boundaries & Emotional Safety

Free Parent Resource

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01. Regulate First

Pause Before You Respond

Your nervous system sets the tone. A regulated parent helps a child return to safety and connection.

Say quietly to yourself: **'My child needs me to be the steady one here'**

- Take one slow breath before speaking
- Remind yourself: "My child is overwhelmed, not giving me a hard time — they're communicating that they need my help."
- Notice your own triggers (noise, defiance, disrespect) without acting from them
- Anchor into your value: I want to respond, not react. I want to connect, not escalate.

02. Look Underneath

Identify the Emotion Beneath the Behaviour

Tantrums are a child's way of communicating distress, frustration, fear, or overwhelm.

Say: 'I can see that something feels really big for you right now. I'm here'

Ask yourself: What might my child be feeling right now?

Look for cues: clenched fists, crying, yelling, hiding, running away, shutting down, avoiding eye contact, refusing to move, throwing objects

- Behaviour is communication, not manipulation
- When overwhelmed, children lose access to executive functioning
- Hold the mindset: "There is always a feeling driving this."

03. Connection First

Validate the Emotion, Not the Behaviour

Validation calms the nervous system and helps the child feel seen, even when limits are needed.

Say: 'I can see how upset you are. It's okay to feel angry. It's not okay to hit or throw'

- Separate the feeling from the action
- Acknowledge their inner experience without agreeing to the behaviour
- Use simple, grounded language
- Avoid dismissing, fixing, or judging

04. Safety

Set Clear, Calm Boundaries

Boundaries teach safety, predictability, and emotional containment.

Say: 'I can't let you hit. If your body needs to move, you can stomp, squeeze this pillow, do jumping jacks, or go up and down the stairs'

- Keep boundaries short and consistent
- Use a neutral tone — firm but warm
- Offer alternatives instead of threats
- Hold the limit even if their reaction becomes stronger

05. Build Agency

Offer Autonomy Within Your Boundaries

Choice reduces power struggles and helps children feel capable rather than controlled.

Say: 'Do you prefer to sit next to me, have a hug, or take space on the couch? You choose'

- Give 2-3 simple choices
- Keep choices within your non-negotiables
- Reinforce that they still have influence, even when upset

06. Emotional Literacy

Help Them Name Their Experience

Naming emotions builds long-term regulation skills and reduces anxiety.

Say: 'It looks like you're feeling frustrated because things didn't go the way you hoped'

- Use simple, concrete language
- Reflect what you see without assuming intent
- Model emotional literacy

07. Co-Regulation First

Guide Them Back to Regulation

Children borrow your calm.

Because children aren't born with the ability to regulate themselves, they first need to co-regulate with a caring adult in order to develop that skill and eventually become independent.

Say: 'Your body feels really tight. Let's breathe together or squeeze my hands'

- Offer grounding tools: deep breaths, sensory input, movement
- Stay close if they want proximity; give space if they need distance
- Keep your voice slow and steady
- Avoid lecturing during the peak

08. This Is Where Learning Happens

Reflect Together Once Calm Returns

Say: 'You were so upset, and you worked hard to calm down. Next time you feel that angry, you can tell me 'I need help' instead of hitting. Is there anything else that could help you to calm down next time?'

- Keep it brief and non-shaming
- Highlight what they did well
- Reinforce the boundary and the value behind it
- Explore what they can try next time

09. Values

Understand the Long-Term Impact

Your reaction teaches your child what emotions mean and how relationships work.

Say to yourself: 'I'm teaching a skill, not winning a battle'

- Responding with anger or punishment teaches: "I'm bad when I'm upset."
- Giving in teaches: "The only way to get what I want is to escalate."
- Staying steady teaches: "My parent can handle my feelings."

This builds emotional regulation, resilience, and delayed gratification.

10. Connection

Repair the Relationship

Repair teaches children that relationships can withstand stress and remain secure.

Say: 'I got overwhelmed earlier. I'm sorry I raised my voice. You didn't deserve that. I'm here, and we're okay.'

- Own your part without shame
- Model accountability and emotional maturity
- Reinforce that the relationship is safe and not at risk

11. Why This Matters

When Children Fear Losing Connection

A child's deepest need during overwhelm is to feel that the relationship is safe.

When connection feels uncertain, children may:

- become hyper-alert to your mood
- hide or suppress emotions
- become overly compliant or people-pleasing
- escalate more intensely
- struggle to regulate
- internalise: "I'm too much" or "Love disappears when I struggle."

When connection stays steady, children learn:

- "Our relationship is safe"
- "My feelings don't scare my parent"
- "I can be upset and still be loved"
- "I can handle big emotions because my parent can handle me"

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Thank You for Reading

This resource was created to support parents in responding to big emotions with connection, boundaries, and emotional safety.

I hope you found it helpful, valuable and practical in strengthening your relationship with your child and creating more meaningful moments of connections.

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