



Therapy Changes

Focused guidance when you need it most

THE THERAPY CHANGES GUIDE

Helping Parents and Children Increase Emotional Intelligence





Introduction

Childhood meltdowns are inevitable. As frustrating as they can be, they also represent an opportunity to teach your child at an early age – when he or she is making leaps and bounds in their emotional growth – how to manage strong feelings and calm down. Like many parents, you may find it hard to know how to respond during these trying times with your child.

This guide is written for parents to help teach their children the skills necessary to increase emotional intelligence by remaining calm and focusing on the positives. At Therapy Changes, we believe in a family approach so parents can learn alongside their child and model new ways of approaching problems and expressing oneself. Parents benefit by learning emotional reasoning skills themselves and be more accountable for incorporating the skills at home and with their children. Children are likely to benefit from individual therapy with a child therapist to reinforce the skills, learn new coping strategies, and promote self-discovery.

Table of Contents

Understanding Your Child's Anger.....	3
CARS Technique.....	5
STEP 1: CONNECT.....	6
STEP 2: ALTERNATIVES (Offer a Choice).....	8
STEP 3: RESPOND.....	10
STEP 4: SET LIMITS.....	11
Conclusions.....	13



Understanding Your Child's Anger

All children – like all adults – have emotion and thus at times will get angry. Sometimes a child's anger is a natural response to a perceived threat in his or her environment. Most other times, however, children express anger in response to their own emotions. Unlike adults, children have not yet learned how to identify the complex emotions behind the anger and thus do not communicate the true emotion they are feeling. In addition, children have a difficult time regulating emotion and thus their reaction is likely to be more intense.

This is due, in part, to the fact that children do not have a fully developed frontal cortex; the part of the brain responsible for self-regulation. The result is that children are more prone to lash out when they feel something that they do not understand; like fear, hurt, sadness, loneliness, embarrassment, shame, pain, and grief. Let's consider some examples:.

Johnny, a high energy 8 year old was asked to leave his aftercare program for hitting another boy on the playground. Johnny lost his temper when he saw Kyle breaking the rules. Even after Johnny said to Kyle to "cut it out" and told the teacher what Kyle was doing, the bad behavior continued. Feeling confused, unheard, scared and helpless, Johnny lashed out in anger.

Sophie, a sensitive 7 year old cried inconsolably and screamed at her mother "I hate you and I wish you were dead!" Just prior, she had learned that her favorite stuffed animal was ruined in the wash. Without having the skill set to manage the difficult emotions of grief and loss, Sophie reverted to anger to express herself.

Ten year old Angel reached over at the dinner table and pulled her little sister's hair – hard. Although this attack was seemingly unprovoked, Angel had been building a perception that her parents were paying more attention to her sister and had growing feelings of hurt, abandonment, fear, and loneliness.



In this guide we will review a four phase plan for helping parents and children increase emotional reasoning. It can be applied in most situations, but primarily it is intended to help guide parents through temper tantrums, outbursts, and other intense emotional reactions that children might experience. This approach is inspired by A New Ways for Families method, the BIFF technique, and the CARS technique, all developed by Billy Eddy, LCSW, Esq. of High Conflict Institute.

Tenets of the Plan:

- Emphasis in working with resistance towards positive change
- Assist the child in being self-reflective and self-aware
- Strengthen the child's ability to make their own plans and decisions
- Help children know that they are heard and that someone is listening
- Place parents as the models for children to learn from
- Focus on teaching skills for decision-making; not making decisions for the child

CARS Technique

When a child has an intense emotional reaction, parents can use the following four-step process to help their child regulate the emotion. The acronym **CARS** is a helpful reminder of the steps:

1. Connect

The best way to connect with children when they are upset is to understand and empathize with what they are thinking and feeling. For example, instead of saying: "There's no reason to get so upset", parents can say: "It's really frustrating when you can't finish a puzzle, isn't it?"

2. Offer Alternatives

Once parents have successfully connected with their children it is likely that the situations – and the child – are calmer. At this time the goal is to assist children in developing constructive problem solving skills. Rather than trying to fix the problem for the child, parents are encouraged to help empower and guide their children to advocate for their own needs and desires.

3. Respond

When a child behaves in a way that necessitates a disciplinary response or consequence, some approaches are better than others. When addressing children, parents can use the acronym BIFF: Be **B**rief, **I**nformative, **F**riendly, and **F**irm.

4. Set Limits

Similarly to the need to respond to children in some circumstances, there are times when it is necessary for parents to set limits with their children. Allowing for feelings does not mean that destructive actions are allowed. Even when children are learning how to manage their emotions, they are still responsible for their behavior.



Unlike adults, children have not yet learned how to identify complex emotions behind their anger. The CARS method helps children process and adapt those feelings.

STEP 1: CONNECT

Validate and Acknowledge

The best way to connect with children when they are upset is to understand and empathize with what they are thinking and feeling. For example, instead of saying: "There's no reason to get so upset", parents can say: "It's really frustrating when you can't finish a puzzle, isn't it?"

By acknowledging the more threatening feeling beneath the anger, children feel heard and begin to calm themselves down. Parents are encouraged to listen with empathy, be gentle, and pay close attention to what the child is saying. It is important not to impose feelings onto the child, but rather name the feelings that they are experiencing.

For example: *"I see that you are putting your head in your hands. This tells me you might feel embarrassed."* or *"I think you might be feeling scared right now."* Parents can also communicate that it's normal to have conflicting emotions about something. For example: *"This is really confusing, it is sad to say goodbye but you are also happy to be going home."*

In his book, *Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child*, John Gottman says that when parents help children understand and handle overwhelming feelings such as anger, frustration, or confusion they develop an emotional intelligence quotient, or "Emotional IQ." And, says Gottman, a child with a high Emotional IQ is better able to cope with intense feelings, feel calm, understand and relate well to others, and form strong bonds.



Stay Present

We do not want children to receive the message that they are all alone with their big, scary feelings. So, whenever possible stay present with children to help them move through the difficult emotion. This may prove to be difficult, depending on the level of intensity of the emotion. This is a time when parents can practice being self-aware and use their own self-care techniques to remain calm. A parent's role at this time is to serve as a "Mirror With Heart" by communicating with the child that they are safe – and not alone.

When a child is very upset, they are not likely to be reasonable and respond to logic. It's easy to get "emotionally hooked" and feel the urge to respond with anger. This is an opportunity for parents to set an example by staying calm and refraining from being verbally harsh or criticizing. For example, instead of saying: *"You make me so crazy!"* try: *"It upsets me when you do that."* By complaining and not blaming, children will see the problem as the behavior, and not themselves.

Using Context

Understanding the circumstance that contributes to the emotion will help children feel more in control. For example, parents can say: *"I know you are sad, it's so hard to be six years old and not get a say in what we have for dinner,"* or *"I would be hurt if my friend said something mean to me, too."* Sometimes children appear sad or upset for no immediate reason. In these situations, a bigger view of the child's environment may help shed some light on the issue. For example, has the child moved recently? Did they overhear an argument between their parents? Or, did they recently experience a loss by death?



Putting it together:

"I see that you are angry. You are probably feeling sad because you worked hard on your project and it didn't turn out the way you had hoped. It's okay - everyone needs to cry or be sad sometimes. I will stay right here with you while you get all of your sads and mads out."

STEP 2: ALTERNATIVES (Offer A Choice)

Once parents have successfully connected with their children it is likely that the situations – and the child – are calmer. At this time the goal is to assist children in developing constructive problem solving skills. Rather than trying to fix the problem for the child, parents are encouraged to help empower and guide their children to advocate for their own needs and desires.

“Forced Choices”

A “forced choice” is offering two options that the child can choose from. This strategy is especially effective for younger children, children who are still developing problem-solving skills, or if the child is still upset and not thinking clearly. Let’s consider some examples:

- *“You can clean the table now or in fifteen minutes when you have calmed down”*
- *“Would you rather play with another toy or practice being patient and take turns?”*
- *“Please either pick up the stuffed animals or the Legos”*
- *“To help you calm down, you can either color in your room or ride your bike”*
- *“Do you want to deal with this now, or should I come back in ten minutes?”*
- *“This needs to be fixed. You can do it today or tomorrow – which do you prefer?”*

Use Time-Out if Necessary

Contrary to the popular conception that “time outs” are a punishment, ideally “time-outs” can be utilized as a much-needed break. An effective “time out” will allow the child time to self-soothe, or ask for help to calm down. Parents can either tell a child that they need to take a time-out, or use this as one of the options to choose from. For example: *“I see that you are getting upset. Let’s both take a time-out and we’ll talk again in a half hour”* or *“You can either talk calmly to me, or take a break.”* Remember, a time-out **always** requires a time back in!





Don't ignore yourself!

Parents are encouraged to stay in-tune with their emotions during this process. Some parents ignore their own negative emotions hoping to spare their children discomfort or difficulty. But hiding feelings will likely confuse children and possibly increase their frustration. Parents are encouraged to acknowledge that they are displeased without acting upset. This will show children that it is okay to feel, and that even difficult feelings can be managed.

Problem Solving

When children are calm enough to use rational thinking, parents can provide guidance to help utilize problem solving skills to address the problem at hand. Remember, **feelings aren't decisions**, so it is important to shift the focus away from emotions and towards what actionable steps can be taken that are within the child's power and control.

Written Problem Solving Exercise for Children:

1. Children write a list of possible solutions to the problem, no matter how "out of the box" they might be;
2. Parents and children examine the list together and discuss how realistic each option is – even the silly ones;
3. Once the list has been narrowed down, parents give their child the choice between the acceptable options.

Writing and reading a list activates the part of the brain responsible for logical thinking and should help both parents and children remain calm. In addition, allowing the child to make his or her own choice will give them power at a time when they feel overwhelmed and powerless.

Be proactive

At a neutral time, parents can assist children in making a list of constructive ways to handle difficult emotions. This list can be decorated by the child and posted somewhere central in the house like on the refrigerator or on the child's bedroom door. At times of high stress, children can refer to the list as a reminder of the things that they can do to move through the difficult emotion. Parents can also use the list and model the skills. For example: *"I'm getting annoyed, so I'm checking our MAD list. Oh, I think I'll put on some music and dance out my frustration!"*

Parents can also help children be more aware of "warning signs." Once children are in the midst of a temper tantrum, they are not easily calmed down. By noticing when the child is getting annoyed huge meltdowns can potentially be avoided. For example, say: "Sweetie, you're getting upset. We can make this better. Let's both calm down and figure this out together."

STEP 3: RESPOND

When a child behaves in a way that necessitates a disciplinary response or consequence, some approaches are better than others. When addressing children, parents can use the acronym BIFF: **B**e Brief, **I**nformative, **F**riendly, and **F**irm.

BIFF responses are:

1. **Brief:** Keep it brief. Long explanations make children feel confused and frustrated.
2. **Informative:** Focus on straight information, not arguments, reactions, emotions, or defending yourself (you don't need to).
3. **Friendly:** By being empathetic, expressing concern, and responding warmly, the child will feel heard and become less defensive.
4. **Firm:** Gently repeat information and close the door to further argument.

The following tips can be used for children who have a tendency towards debate and who may be argumentative:

- Let children know that you may never know the full story.
- Say: "You might be right."
- Remain future-focused: decisions still need to be made, and steps can be taken.
- Do not apologize unnecessarily .
- Do not make promises that cannot be kept.
- If a reparative statement needs to be made, phrase it positively. For example, instead of saying: "I will not make you wear the green shoes again" say: "I will keep in mind that you do not like to wear your green shoes and I will take it into consideration."

"Broken Record" Technique

Remember, parents set the rules! Even though it may be appropriate at times to include children in discussion, it is important for parents to make a firm position when disciplining children. Rather than continuing to debate with children, the "broken record" technique can be used by simply repeating what has already been said. For example:

- "As I said, the rule is we clean our rooms before we go outside and play."
- "Nevertheless, it is time to leave now."
- "I know that you are upset, but we still have to listen and follow directions."



At first, children may become increasingly upset with the broken record technique. Usually, after a short amount of time children will abandon the argumentative behavior when they realize that their debate tactics are no longer effective.

STEP 4: SET LIMITS

Similarly to the need to respond to children in some circumstances, there are times when it is necessary for parents to set limits with their children. Allowing for feelings does not mean that destructive actions are allowed. Even when children are learning how to manage their emotions, they are still responsible for their behavior.

When a child is having a hard time calming down, they are responsible for asking for help. Examples of healthy limits might include: not allowing children to cause physical harm to themselves or others, destroy property, or use unkind words.

"The rule is...."

An easy way to set limits in a way that bypasses defenses is to utilize "The Rule Is..." intervention. In this way, parents redirect focus away from themselves and onto a set of guidelines that are seemingly "out of their hands." This frees the parent to be present with the child and remain the ally. The following guidelines will help make this intervention effective:

- Set the rules ahead of time.
- Include children in making the rules, when appropriate.
- Clearly state the rules.
- Visibly display the rules whenever possible.
- Phrase rules positively – that is, what you want to see versus what you don't want to see.

For example: *"You can be as mad as you want, remember that the rule is we keep our hands and feet to ourselves."*





Bypass Defenses

Going “with” a child’s resistance means establishing rewards for good behavior. This allows the parent to remove him or herself from being the disciplinarian, and allows for natural consequences to prevail. For example:

Reward: First finish dinner, then get dessert

Choice: “You can finish your dinner and get dessert, or not finish and skip dessert.”

Reward: Finish your homework and feel good that you made your teacher happy

Choice: “You can finish your homework and show Mrs. Smith at school tomorrow what a great job you did, or stop now and be prepared to tell her why you didn’t finish.”

Consider whether or not the reward is enticing enough for the child, and/or if the child is already getting “rewarded” with negative attention.

Below are more tips for using natural consequences and rewards:

- “Your teachers asked us to...”
- “Let’s take the high road...”
- “I understand, however someone else might misunderstand you...”
- “Let’s choose our battles...”

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Conclusions

Children, like adults all have grumpy moods, bad attitudes, disrespectful tones, or bad days. As frustrating as these moments are for both children and parents, they represent an opportunity to not only learn more about oneself, but develop the coping skills necessary to deal with difficult emotions.

Parents can help their children by first connecting with their children during these difficult times and offering alternatives to help reassure their child that they do not have to remain “stuck” in the difficult emotion. Most of the time, by allowing children the experience of expressing themselves in a healthy and nonviolent way, they will learn how to calm themselves down naturally.

This process may be difficult and some parents may find it challenging to resist the urge to either solve their child’s problem or “will” them out of the emotion. But, with patience and understanding children will ultimately become more adept at emotional regulation – a skill that will serve them throughout their life. There will be times, however, when parents need to respond to children and set limits. In these cases, children typically respond best when parents maintain a positive approach and focus on what the child can do rather than what they are doing wrong.



No one said parenting would be easy, but for most parents it is surprising how difficult it really can be. It takes a great deal of courage to ask for support and guidance when it is needed most, and here at Therapy Changes we honor your willingness to do so.



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For more information on our family and child therapy sessions, visit our website or call us at 619-275-2286.

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