

EMOTIONAL RESCUE

Do your child's moods swing wildly from minute to minute? We've got ways to help smooth the ups and downs.

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Living with a preschooler can be like riding an emotional roller coaster. Your child is happy to be playing with his favorite toy, then angry that his big brother grabbed it away, and then sad that the toy is broken. In the span of a few minutes, he's gone from giggles to rage to tears, and the drama has probably left you drained too.

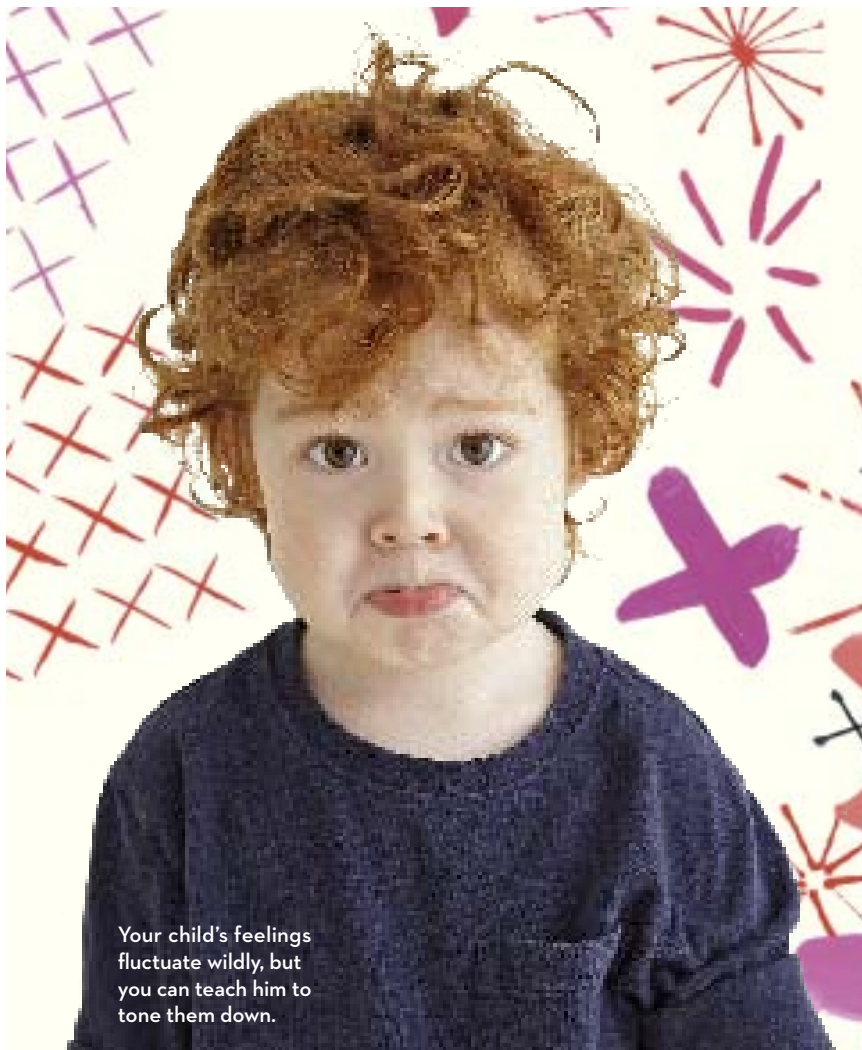
Why do young kids tend to have such extreme mood swings? It's not because they feel things more deeply than adults do. "Toddlers and preschoolers simply haven't learned to express their emotions in socially acceptable ways, so they have a tendency to spiral out of control very quickly," says Linda Acredolo, Ph.D., coauthor of *Baby Hearts: A Guide to Giving Your Child an Emotional Head Start*.

Your child's emotional development begins right from birth. Studies show that newborns are capable of feeling

distress and contentment, and that a child can display joy, sadness, anger, and fear by his first birthday. Jealousy and guilt kick in around age 2. Coping skills, however, generally don't come along as early or as easily.

That's where you come in. As a parent, it's your job to help your child recognize what he's feeling and deal with it appropriately. According to research by John Gottman, Ph.D., coauthor of *Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child*, coaching a kid to label his emotions actually calms his nervous system, which translates into fewer meltdowns. The long-term payoff is even greater: Studies show that kids who can manage their feelings get along better with their peers, excel in school, and are less likely to behave defiantly or aggressively. Our guide will help your child learn how to handle his powerful emotions—and provide exercises you can work on together.





Your child's feelings fluctuate wildly, but you can teach him to tone them down.

defusing anger

Anger is an especially tough emotion for your child to manage because it causes a surge of adrenaline that makes his heart race and triggers the impulse to lash out. Curbing an inappropriate response, such as hitting or biting, takes continual reinforcement with these six steps: 1. Verbalize for your child why he's upset ("You're mad because Zach got marker on your giraffe"). 2. Validate his feelings ("I'd be upset, too, if that happened to my stuff"). 3. Explain that hitting (or kicking or biting) isn't a suitable way to deal with his rage. 4. Ask how he thinks his actions made the other person feel. 5. Enforce a consequence (such as a time-out or a loss of privileges). 6. Have an older child apologize once he's cooled down.

Although punching a pillow or stomping his feet may seem like a reasonable way for your child to blow off steam, a study published in the *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* suggests these outlets actually do the opposite. "They get a child revved up even more," says Matthew Hertenstein, Ph.D., lead researcher at the Touch and Emotion Lab at DePauw University, in Greencastle, Indiana. A better way to get the angries out is for him to do some nonaggressive activities (such as jumping jacks) for a while to release his negative energy.

*** try this!** At bedtime on the day of an anger episode, have your child lie on his back, close his eyes, place his hands on his tummy, and complete this exercise (explain that it will help him relax so

he'll fall asleep faster): As he inhales, tell him to picture a balloon filling up with air. Ask him to hold his breath for several seconds and then slowly breathe out so the balloon gets little again. Then, the next time he's angry you can suggest that he place his hands on his stomach and picture blowing up a balloon and letting out the air as he takes deep breaths to calm down.

facing fear

All sorts of things can frighten a young child, ranging from dogs to starting preschool to the vacuum cleaner that sounds like it might swallow her up whole. Three-year-old Isabelle Ondrak, for example, has a serious problem with bugs. "She screams at the mere sight of any flying insect," says her mom, Cathy, from Denver.

Experts say it's important to take such fears seriously because they're very real to your child. "Saying, 'Don't be silly. This bug isn't going to hurt you,' doesn't validate her suffering," says Dr. Gottman. Instead, focus on easing her anxiety. You might point out the similarities between bees (ouch!) and butterflies (beautiful)—they both fly, help flowers grow, and are colorful. You can also try a "show and tell" approach. For instance, show her that a vacuum can't even suck up a small tissue box, or explain to her why dogs bark so loudly ("That's just how they talk").

*** try this!** Preschoolers are far less likely to be afraid of something if they are able to picture it in a playful, nonthreatening light, according to a study published in *Child Development*. With that in mind, you can have your child draw a picture of the neighbor's scary dog, and then add long eyelashes, pink polka dots, freckles, and other silly things to make it seem less intimidating. Once the masterpiece is finished, give it a title (such as "Don the Dopey Dog") and have a good laugh. The next time she's frightened, tell her to remember the drawing and suggest a reassuring mantra ("Don the Dopey Dog won't hurt me").

taming jealousy

Envy is a natural emotion in toddlers and preschoolers, but don't expect your child to realize that's what he's feeling. He's more likely to say he's "mad" or "frustrated" that his baby brother gets so much attention or that his friend has his own room while he has to share one. While it's obvious to you that he's jealous, making him feel better isn't quite so simple. You can begin by acknowledging the way he's feeling ("I know you wish you had your own room like Ben, and that makes you a little jealous of him"). Then offer some suggestions for easing his envy. You might try partitioning your kids' bedroom so that he has a dedicated space or establishing specific times when he gets to use it by himself. If he's jealous of your newborn, explain that infants can't do things for themselves like big boys can. Then set aside a regular window of time to spend alone with him—and do your best to avoid breaking your date, so he knows he still comes first.

*** try this!** In a quiet moment, make a list together of all the things he has to be thankful for (friends, a nice house, a family that loves him, food to eat, etc.). Read them back whenever his jealous feelings return. Reinforce the idea by having him box up clothing and toys that he's outgrown and donating them to a local shelter. Explain that some kids don't have games to play with, clothes that fit, or even a place to call home.

letting go of guilt

By age 3 or 4, your child is developing a conscience. Even if no one witnesses her doing something wrong, she'll probably feel bad about it. When Leigh Face, of Hagerstown, Maryland, found a puzzle box stuck to the windowsill, her 4-year-old daughter, Natalie, claimed she didn't know what had happened. But the next day, Natalie suddenly burst into tears. "It turns out she had spilled milk and covered it up with the box," says Face. "She felt awful about it."

In this case, crying over spilled milk was a good thing; it meant that Natalie had developed a sense of right and wrong. A study published in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* found that young kids who felt guilty when they misbehaved were better able to control their conduct as grade-schoolers. "Being remorseful lets a child reflect on the consequences of her action, which makes her less inclined to do it again," says Rahil Briggs, Psy.D., a child psychologist and director of the Healthy Steps program at the Montefiore Medical Center, in Bronx, New York.

You can help your child work through her guilt by defining it ("You

feel bad about not telling me what happened"), explaining why it was the wrong thing to do ("You should always tell the truth"), suggesting a better path for the future ("Next time, let me know right away when you spill something so it'll be easier to clean it up"), and making amends ("Now let's work on removing it together").

*** try this!** Books that have a moral message, such as *The Berenstain Bears and the Truth*, can start a conversation about honesty and guilt. While you're reading, stop and ask your child questions, such as, "What would you do if you were in Brother and Sister Bear's situation?" or "How do you think they felt when they lied?"

soothing sadness

A preschooler's life has its fair share of bummers, such as when her playdate gets canceled or she gets in trouble for talking during circle time. A young child's sorrow often fades quickly, but sometimes it lingers. When 4-year-old Faith Wiggins lost her new ring at preschool, she was heartbroken. "Weeks later, she still tears up about it every now and then," says her mom, Paula, of Greencastle, Indiana.

When your child's feeling blue, don't just try to distract her. Instead, tell her about a time when you felt sad as a child ("I once lost my teddy bear, and I couldn't stop crying"). Hold her hand, give her a hug, and let her know it's okay to be down sometimes. Then come up with ideas for lifting her spirits, such as playing dress-up with some of her other play jewelry.

*** try this!** At the dinner table, share an event that made you happy and one that made you sad that day. Then ask your child to do the same thing (young kids may need some prompting to recall specific events and express themselves). This will help her learn to identify these emotions and realize that she experiences the same types of feelings that other people do—which is the first critical step in helping her figure out how to control them. 😊

More Than Moody

It's typical for a young child to have strong feelings. But if she seems down in the dumps most of the time or swings quickly between sadness and elation, she could have a mood disorder. Harold Koplewicz, M.D., a *Parents* advisor and director of the Child Mind Institute, in New York City, suggests seeing a mental-health specialist if your child displays one or more of these signs on a daily basis for at least two weeks.

- Frequent complaints about vague physical ailments ("Mommy, I have a headache")
- Severe irritability, aggression, or defiance, often accompanied by shouting or temper tantrums
- Intense fear about the future, illness, or death
- A loss of interest in playing with friends and doing fun activities (like going to a birthday party)
- Regression (such as wetting the bed or soiling her underwear long after she's been toilet trained)
- Sudden difficulty falling or staying asleep