

How to help kids keep calm

Experiencing frustration, disappointment, fear and jealousy is challenging, even as adults. So how can we help our tamariki understand and manage strong emotions?

Play detective

For children, behaviour is a key means of communication. Sometimes we have to work like detectives to figure out what their behaviour is really 'saying'.

- **Context:** Have a think about your whānau over the past six months. Children watch us very carefully and pick up on tension even if they don't understand the full story. If there's a clue here, look for ways to reduce stress, alleviate fears or improve things.
- **Relationships:** Think about your child's key relationships – with you, other carers, their friends. How are you/they getting along? If you think an issue with any of these people could be at play, schedule some fun time with your child, or oversee a few playdates with significant friends, to ensure they're positive and fun.
- **Beyond home:** If you can, spend some time at their day-care, kindy or school to see how things are going. If they're struggling with part of their day or the way someone is relating to them call on the support of their teacher. A team approach can be a great thing for your child.

Help them understand emotions

- **Use faces:** With young tamariki, print photos or drawings of different emotions and ask your child to show you how they're feeling. This also helps validate their emotions. Visit allright.org.nz/sparklers/face-game/ for a free print out.
- **Link to emotions:** Help your child 'name' the feelings they're experiencing. E.g. 'Oh your tower fell over! You look a bit sad about that!' or "Wow, you did it all yourself! You must be proud."
- **Notice emotions:** When you read books and watch movies, help identify characters' emotions. E.g. 'She seems nervous about the big race.'

Be a positive role model

Most of what our tamariki learn about emotions comes from us. How we respond to our own worries, stress and frustrations will inform how our kids learn to deal with everyday challenges. By showing you feel different emotions and can bounce back, you'll help them learn to respond to small problems with optimism, calmness and confidence. During stressful times you could even say, "I feel frustrated that I keep making mistakes, so I might just have a quick break and then come back to it".

Tears and safety

Children experience BIG emotions, just like we do. When emotions run high, helping them feel safe can really help. That might mean holding them, talking in a calm voice or encouraging them to take nice deep breaths. Once they're settled, distracting younger children can be a good technique, and praising older kids for calming down can really help to reinforce this response.

A calm space

Make your home as calm as possible and discuss a place where your child feels relaxed and at peace. Designate this as their 'calm space' – a place they can go when they're upset to practice their tummy breathing, colour in or look at books. You could also make them a glitter soother they can shake, watching it 'calm down' as they do.

MINDFULNESS FOR PARENTS

FOCUSING ON THE GOOD IS SOMETHING WE NEVER STOP LEARNING. [HEAD TO THE MIND YOUR HEAD SECTION OF OUR WEBSITE](#) FOR OUR FAVOURITE IDEAS ON MINDFULNESS AND ENJOYING THE MOMENT.

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Teach calming techniques

Trying to teach children the techniques below in the heat of the moment would be like trying to teach an angry bear to play the clarinet! It just won't work. So when your child is calm, try a few of the below.

- **Find what works:** Talk about what helps you calm down and suggest things they could try when they're next upset. Energetic kids may need to run around; others will respond to quiet time; others will need hugs and physical touch. It's a matter of finding the right strategies for your tamariki.
- **Tummy breathing:** See our in-class Tummy Breathing activity and/or watch '[Tummy Breathing, Sesame Street](#)' on YouTube then practice this calming technique together. Let them know they can do this anytime they're upset or want to feel calm.
- **Mindfulness:** Mindfulness is beneficial for people of all ages. We recommend the CD [Sitting Still Like A Frog](#) (available at the library). There are also [lots of fun ideas](#) of things you can try together, online.

Mid-meltdown!

Practice the above techniques alongside your tamariki in calm moments, then gently remind them to try one when they are next upset. Praise their efforts, even if they don't quite pull it off. They'll get easier and more effective. Another cause for praise is when they use the technique of their own accord, a sign that they are trying to self-manage their emotions.

Embrace routine

When children can anticipate what is coming next, it creates a sense of control and calm. We have two [printer-friendly routine charts](#) you can download and use; one for kids aged 3-10, and the other for tweens and teens.

What about aggression?

Like most aspects of development, each child is different when it comes to aggressive behaviour. 'Big reactors' will rely more heavily on their actions to communicate feelings. Here are some things you can do to help.

- **Be patient:** Early on, emotions will trump thinking skills, even if kids 'know' the rules. It can help to remember that empathy and self-control come with age.
- **Be consistent:** If a child hits out or emotions run too high, simply say: "I need you to calm" and sit with them in their calm space. Avoid negotiating, and calmly repeat this whenever they need to calm down.
- **Lead the way:** This one can be a major challenge, as aggressive acts can be hurtful and infuriating! But when you can, react minimally. A calm response will get better results than a red-hot one, helping you diffuse the situation and 'model' how they should behave when they're upset. Kids love to copy us!
- **Identify triggers:** Aggressive acts can emerge when kids are tired, hungry, overwhelmed, or overstimulated and unsure where to focus their energy. They can also come from feeling insecure or undervalued. Ask yourself: When is your tamariki most likely to 'act out'?

- **Think prevention:** Use what you know to plan ahead. You may be able to stop aggressive behaviour before it starts, or you'll be ready to be calm but firm.

Build their self-esteem

Our children are learning how to adjust their behaviour in almost every situation. Ensure you do lots to help them feel good about who they are and show that you love them unconditionally. Praise specific behaviour. E.g. rather than just "good girl" try "I love the way you tidied up."

Praise effort:

Boost tenacity by encouraging their attempts to try something (e.g. new skills, interests, chores, homework, etc). If they get frustrated or say: "I can't do it!" reassure them: "You can't do it YET but with practice you will, just like when you learned to [insert a success they've had here]. Remember how you tried over and over, then you got it? This is the same."

Celebrate calm moments:

Give your tamariki attention when they're behaving the way you LOVE (calm, content, engrossed in play, sharing, being kind). The best reward (and reinforcement) is your time and attention. Even 10 minutes of play with you a day will make a huge difference... promise!

Big thanks to the following people for helping us create this resource.

- Dr Dean Sutherland: Department of Communication Disorders, University of Canterbury
- Clare Tatterson: Developmental Psychologist at the Champion Centre, Christchurch

For our favourite kids' books, resources and tips, head to allright.org.nz/sparklers/kids