

# WEATHERING THE STORMS



## A GUIDE TO HEALTHY EXPRESSIONS OF EMOTIONS FOR PARENTS AND CHILDREN

**We've all been there!** Our toddler has a meltdown, our child gets really upset and has a hard time calming down, or our teenager's emotions are unpredictable. These emotional storms may cause us to feel angry, frustrated, helpless, or embarrassed. We may even say or do things we regret. Emotions can be overwhelming, like a storm, but learning to express emotions in a healthier way can make these difficult times less stressful.

**This guide can help you and your child weather emotional storms.** By modeling and teaching your child the ideas and skills in this guide, you can help your child manage emotions better. Practicing these skills yourself can improve communication with your child, partner, relatives, coworkers, and friends. Learning to express your emotions in a healthier way can help you be calmer and more in control of your actions.

Use this guide to help you learn how to weather emotional storms and have more sunny days!



# TALKING ABOUT THE WEATHER: Identifying Emotions

Just as there are many types of weather, people have a wide range of emotions. Some feelings are pleasant and comforting. Some are powerful or scary. Because all of our emotions are normal, it's important to acknowledge them, even if we don't like them or wish they weren't there. Identifying emotions with words can help you talk more easily about them. When you name emotions, strong feelings become less scary and overwhelming. Here are some ways to teach your child to identify emotions:

- 1. Label your child's feelings.<sup>1</sup>** While you can do this when your child is upset, you should also do this when you and your child are calm. Children can be more open to learning about emotions when they're not feeling upset. With younger children, you can start with simple emotions like **mad**, **sad**, **happy**, and **scared**. You can also use colors to symbolize emotions. For example, red for **anger**, blue for **sadness**, and green for **jealousy**.
  - "You're so **excited** that Grandma is here!"
  - "You're really **upset** that we're out of cereal today."
- 2. Express your own feelings as a model for your child.<sup>1</sup>**
  - If you spill milk, you can say, "I'd better take a deep breath since I'm feeling **frustrated**."
  - When you get praise at work, share, "I'm very **proud** of myself for working so hard!"
- 3. Point out expressions of feelings** in books, in people's faces, when with friends, and while your child is playing.<sup>2</sup> For recommended books, see the book list in this guide or visit your local library.
  - "It looks like your friend may be feeling **sad** right now."
  - "Do you think the girl in this book is feeling **lonely**?"
- 4. Make an emotions book, chart, or collage.<sup>2</sup>** Use pictures or drawings of people with different facial expressions and label the emotions. You can also find a chart on the internet.<sup>3</sup>
- 5. Talk about how emotions feel in your body.** For example, **anxiety** might cause your chest to feel tight, and **anger** might cause you to clench your fists.
- 6. Take your child's emotional temperature.** Use an "emotions thermometer" to ask your child how he or she is feeling. Ask what raises or lowers your child's "temperature."
- 7. Validate your child's feelings so that your child feels safe and understood.**

## Showing You Understand: The Power of Empathy

While naming feelings helps identify them, empathy helps people feel understood and less alone. When you empathize with someone, you show that you understand how they're feeling.<sup>4</sup> You don't need to try to fix anything or agree with them. You just need to show that you care and understand.<sup>5</sup> For example, you might tell your child, "You seem **disappointed** that you didn't get invited to your friend's party. I've had that happen to me, and it really hurt." This is not the same as sympathy, which is showing pity or sadness for someone else's situation.<sup>4</sup>

Using empathy creates the safe emotional space needed to share feelings and build trust, in the moment and in later conversations. We all need empathy from others and from ourselves. Be kind to yourself by acknowledging and accepting your own feelings without judging them.



1) [csefel.vanderbilt.edu/resources/www/www21.html](https://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/resources/www/www21.html)

2) [csefel.vanderbilt.edu/documents/teaching\\_emotions.pdf](https://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/documents/teaching_emotions.pdf)

3) [csefel.vanderbilt.edu/modules/2006/feelingchart.pdf](https://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/modules/2006/feelingchart.pdf)

4) <https://youtu.be/1Ewgu369Jw>

5) [www.ahaparenting.com/parenting-tools/emotional-intelligence/steps-to-encourage](https://www.ahaparenting.com/parenting-tools/emotional-intelligence/steps-to-encourage)

# WHEN CLOUDS ARE GATHERING: Use Calming Activities

If you see emotional clouds developing in your child or yourself, calming activities can help prevent them from becoming a storm. As a parent, it's important to calm yourself before your own feelings get out of control. Name and accept your feelings and use one or more calming activities. You will be more able to help your child when you're calmer.<sup>6</sup> To prepare for a potential storm in your child, in a relaxed moment, talk about which of the following ideas your child would like to try when emotions get more intense:



## Calm your body and mind

- Take 10 deep breaths. You can teach your child how to “Belly Breathe” with Elmo at [https://youtu.be/\\_mZbzDOpylA](https://youtu.be/_mZbzDOpylA).
- Notice where you're holding tension in your body and shake it out.<sup>6</sup>
- Do something that brings you comfort. Cuddle a special blanket, play with a beloved toy, read a favorite book, drink a cup of tea, get a hug, or listen to music.
- Take time away from others if you need it.
- Slow down by paying attention to the present moment. Focus on your breath, pay attention to the way your body feels, or use a free mindfulness app like Headspace or Calm.<sup>7</sup>
- Find more ideas in the *Make Time for Yourself Self-Care Guide* at [www.yolokids.org/make-time-yourself-self-care-guide-busy-parents](http://www.yolokids.org/make-time-yourself-self-care-guide-busy-parents).

## Move your body (Physical exercise can help change your emotions!)

- Get your heart rate up with a run, walk, bike ride, basketball or soccer game, or playground trip.
- Flex your muscles with push-ups, pull-ups, or lifting weights.
- Dance, stomp around, or do jumping jacks.
- Younger children may like doing cartwheels or somersaults, the crab walk, or the wheelbarrow.



## Get creative

- Pour out your feelings by writing a journal entry, story, or letter. You can choose to send or tear up your letter!
- Paint, draw, do a craft project, or play with sand or Play Doh.

## Listen to music

- Relax with calming music.
- Find music that is positive and uplifting.



<sup>6</sup> [www.psychologytoday.com/blog/peaceful-parents-happy-kids/201307/3-steps-stay-calm-when-your-child-isnt](http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/peaceful-parents-happy-kids/201307/3-steps-stay-calm-when-your-child-isnt)

<sup>7</sup> [www.healthline.com/health/mental-health/top-meditation-iphone-android-apps#1](http://www.healthline.com/health/mental-health/top-meditation-iphone-android-apps#1)

# WEATHERING THE STORM: Waiting It Out Before Talking



Sometimes, we can't prevent a storm. If calming strategies help get you or your child to a place where you can talk and listen calmly, you can put your umbrella away and move on to the next step in this guide. If the emotions get too intense, you need to wait out the storm before talking about feelings. When the brain is stressed and upset, the thinking part of the brain doesn't work well. It's best to wait until the brain has calmed down to deal with emotions and talking. If you try to talk or discipline during a storm, you and/or your child might respond by fighting (physically or with words), fleeing (running away from the situation), or freezing (not responding).<sup>8</sup>

Children have stormy emotions for many reasons. Sometimes children's strong emotions are normal, age-appropriate responses to everyday situations, like not getting a treat or having to share. Other times, stormy emotions are natural reactions to stress, trauma, grief, loss, or other situations out of the child's control. Regardless of the cause, have empathy for your child, as emotional storms can be scary and confusing. And remember that emotional storms, tantrums, and meltdowns are normal and will happen sometimes no matter what you do.<sup>9</sup>

It can be particularly embarrassing to have a child throw a tantrum or misbehave in public. **You can't control your child, but you can control how you parent and what you do when your child is upset.** Stay calm and don't get caught in your child's storm. Managing your own emotions and reactions will help calm your child and reduce power struggles.<sup>10</sup>

**If you are in the middle of a storm,** take deep breaths and count to 10. Pause. Resist taking action.<sup>8</sup> If you need a break, make sure your child is safe and take a few minutes apart. Calming yourself can help you come back with more patience for your child.

**If your child is in the middle of a storm,** make sure your child is safe, but also watch and learn what your child might need to calm down. This might be a hug, it might be time apart from you for a few minutes, or it might be for you to sit quietly nearby. What you do will depend on your child and the situation. But in general, weathering a storm works best in a calm and quiet environment with no talking or demands. Playing relaxing music and turning off bright lights can sometimes help.

There will be storms, but you can weather them. Even the most intense storms will end. The most important thing is to keep your child physically and emotionally safe.



8) [www.ahaparenting.com/blog/Just\\_Choose\\_Love](http://www.ahaparenting.com/blog/Just_Choose_Love)

9) [csefel.vanderbilt.edu/documents/teaching\\_your\\_child-feeling.pdf](http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/documents/teaching_your_child-feeling.pdf)

10) [www.zerotothree.org/resources/325-i-said-i-want-the-red-bowl-responding-to-toddlers-irrational-behavior](http://www.zerotothree.org/resources/325-i-said-i-want-the-red-bowl-responding-to-toddlers-irrational-behavior)

# IN THE CALM AFTER THE STORM: Responding to Emotions



Once the storm has ended and the weather is calmer, you can deal with what happened. Now is the time to talk, following these guidelines:<sup>11</sup>

1. **Validate your child's feelings.** Listen to your child's feelings. Help your child identify and acknowledge them.
2. **Set limits.** Allow the expression of all emotions, but talk about how you or your child could have expressed emotions differently if there was inappropriate and/or unsafe behavior, such as screaming, throwing, and hitting.
3. **Discuss alternatives.** Provide your child with age-appropriate acceptable choices to give your child some control.<sup>12</sup>
4. **Ask your child what would be helpful the next time a storm comes.** Give your child a chance to think about the experience and ask for what he or she needs.

Here are some examples of what you might say to your child in the calm after the storm:

- "It's okay to tell me how you're feeling, but it's not okay to hurt others, yourself, or things when you feel **frustrated**."<sup>13</sup>
- "Sometimes we don't know how we are feeling. And sometimes, our feelings are **embarrassing** or **confusing**. I am here to help you learn more about feelings and how to handle them when they become too much."
- To a child: "It's okay to be **mad**, but books aren't for throwing. They're for reading. Let's go throw a ball instead."
- To a teen: "It's normal to be **angry** when your friend didn't call when she said she would. That's really frustrating, but you still need to be respectful. Next time, please explain your feelings without being rude."

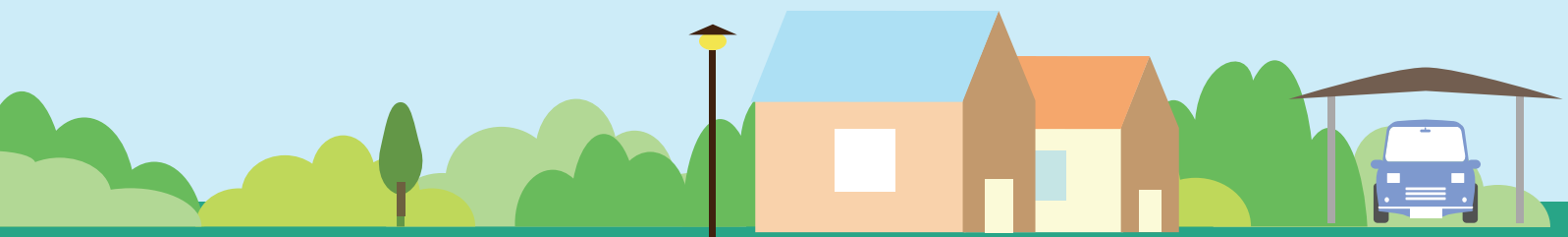
If you lose your cool, apologize to your child. Modeling an apology and calmly explaining what you hope to do differently in the future can be an excellent learning opportunity for your child. It can also help you and your child connect, develop empathy, and move on.



## FORECASTING TOMORROW'S WEATHER: Predicting Emotions

After the storm has passed is also a great time to think about what led to the storm in the first place. Thinking about what caused the storm can help you in future emotional situations. Try to identify what leads to storms for you and your children and write them down. This list will help you when things are starting to get rough. Remember that stress, hunger, and fatigue can cause temperatures to rise, too!

Sometimes you can make changes to avoid storms, but you won't always be able to control the weather. Know that, no matter how hard you try, sometimes the storm will come. It's not your fault. You will get through it and find sunny skies again!



11) [www.zerotothree.org/resources/325-i-said-i-want-the-red-bowl-responding-to-toddlers-irrational-behavior](http://www.zerotothree.org/resources/325-i-said-i-want-the-red-bowl-responding-to-toddlers-irrational-behavior)

12) [www.zerotothree.org/resources/326-toddlers-and-challenging-behavior-why-they-do-it-and-how-to-respond](http://www.zerotothree.org/resources/326-toddlers-and-challenging-behavior-why-they-do-it-and-how-to-respond)

13) [csefel.vanderbilt.edu/documents/teaching\\_emotions.pdf](http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/documents/teaching_emotions.pdf)

# ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

## Websites about Healthy Expressions of Emotions and Parenting

- *Aha! Parenting Advice and Blog*: [www.ahaparenting.com](http://www.ahaparenting.com)
- *Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning*: [csefel.vanderbilt.edu](http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu)
- *Make Time for Yourself—A Self-Care Guide for Busy Parents from Yolo County Children's Alliance*: [www.yolokids.org/make-time-yourself-self-care-guide-busy-parents](http://www.yolokids.org/make-time-yourself-self-care-guide-busy-parents)
- *Talking Is Teaching: Small Children Have Big Feelings*: [www.talkingisteaching.org/big-feelings](http://www.talkingisteaching.org/big-feelings)
- *Zero to Three*: [www.zerotothree.org](http://www.zerotothree.org)

## Picture Books for Children about Emotions

- *Crankenstein* by Samantha Berger
- *The Most Magnificent Thing* by Ashley Spires
- *Life* by Cynthia Rylant
- *Sunday Chutney* by Aaron Blabey
- *Millie Fierce* by Jane Manning
- *Clark the Shark* by Bruce Hale
- *Red: A Crayon's Story* by Michael Hall
- *Prickly Jenny* by Sibylle Delacroix
- *The Day the Crayons Quit* by Drew Daywalt
- *Those Shoes* by Maribeth Boelts
- *We're All Wonders* by R.J. Palacio
- *You're a Crab! A Moody Day Book* by Jenny Whitehead

## Books for Parents

- *The Confident Parent: A Pediatrician's Guide to Caring for Your Little One—Without Losing Your Joy, Your Mind, or Yourself* by Jane Scott and Stephanie Land
- *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead* by Brené Brown
- *How Emotions Are Made: The Secret Life of the Brain* by Lisa Feldman Barrett
- *How to Talk So Kids Will Listen & Listen So Kids Will Talk* by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish
- *Switch: How to Change Things When Change Is Hard* by Chip and Dan Heath

## Resources For More Complex Issues

### National Resources

- **National Parent Helpline** provides parents and caregivers with emotional support and refers them to services. 855-4-A-PARENT (855-427-2736) or [www.nationalparenthelpline.org](http://www.nationalparenthelpline.org)
- **Childhelp National Child Abuse Hotline** offers crisis intervention, information, and referrals to resources. 800-4-A-CHILD or (800-422-4453)
- **National Alliance on Mental Illness** covers warning signs, conditions, and helps people find support and resources. Call the helpline (800-950-6264), text "NAMI" TO 741741, or visit [www.nami.org](http://www.nami.org)

### Yolo County Resources

- **Help Me Grow** offers free developmental questionnaires for families and connects families with children ages 0-5 with resources. 844-410-GROW (4769) or [www.helpmegrowyolo.org](http://www.helpmegrowyolo.org)
- **Mental Health Crisis and Access Line** (available 24/7) at Yolo County Health and Human Services offers screening, referrals, and treatment. 888-965-6647 or [www.yolocounty.org/health-human-services/mental-health/mental-health-services](http://www.yolocounty.org/health-human-services/mental-health/mental-health-services)
- **2-1-1** provides links to local resources. Call 2-1-1 or 855-866-1783 or click links for "Children & Family" or "Mental Health" on [www.211yolocounty.com](http://www.211yolocounty.com)
- **Parenting classes** are available through Yolo County Children's Alliance. 916-572-0560 or [www.yolokids.org/nurturing-parenting-programs](http://www.yolokids.org/nurturing-parenting-programs)
- **Your doctor or your child's pediatrician** can refer you to help.
- **You may be eligible for behavioral/mental health benefits like counseling** if you have health insurance. Call your insurance provider to find out more.

