

BRIEF INTERVENTIONS: PROMOTING SELF-REGULATION

BI-PED PROJECT (BRIEF INTERVENTIONS: PEDIATRICS)

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Self-Regulation: Dealing with Big Feelings

Preschoolers and young school age children may display significant meltdowns when frustrated. Sometimes these are maturational. At other times they are related to impulsivity if the child has ADHD or irritability if the child has an evolving mood disorder. It is helpful to distinguish whether these meltdowns are *reactive* or *manipulative* as well as whether they occur at home and/ or school.

Below are some interventions to assist children in heading off meltdowns. The key is having children practice the strategies when they are calm such as bedtime. Implement the interventions at the beginning of the meltdown. For older children, help them recognize when they are beginning to become upset.

Self- Regulation Activities: (can be used as a patient handout)

- **Breathing exercises** (block breathing x 4 seconds: breathe in for 4 seconds in/ hold x 4 seconds/ breathe out for 4 seconds/ hold x 4 seconds)
- **Toes to Nose exercise:** progressive relaxation starting with toes and moving up the body to legs, abdomen, chest, arms, neck, face and scalp)
- **Glitter jar or snow globe:** have child just shake and watch until they calm down
- **Bubbles:** blowing bubbles can be calming
- **Read books or watch videos** on identifying feelings Ask questions like:
 - "How do you think this character feels right now?"
 - "Why do you think they feel that way?"
- **Label Emotions in the Moment**
 - "You're smiling so big! You look really happy right now."
 - "It seems like you're feeling frustrated because your toy isn't working."

- **Empathize**
 - "I think you might be feeling disappointed because we can't go to the park"
 - "I know you are feeling upset/ sad/ angry"
 - Let your child know it is okay to have emotions, even the difficult ones: "It's okay to feel mad when something doesn't go your way." "Everyone feels scared sometimes. Let's talk about it."
- **Reframe** the child's meltdown as someone who has not learned the proper self-control and self-regulation skills yet
- **Play Emotion Games**
 - Emotion Charades: Take turns acting out emotions like happy, sad, angry, or scared.
 - Emotion Matching: Use cards or pictures of faces showing different emotions and have your child match them to feelings: "Can you show me which face matches how you feel?"
- **Use Mirrors for Practice:** make faces in the mirror that match different emotions
 - "Let's make a happy face together! What does your face look like when you're sad?"
- **Encourage Talking About Emotions:** Ask open-ended questions:
 - "How are you feeling right now?"
 - "What made you feel that way?"
 - For younger children, use simple prompts: "Are you feeling more happy or more sad?"
- **Use Toys and Role Play:** act out emotions using dolls, stuffed animals, or action figures:
 - "This teddy looks sad. What do you think might cheer him up?"
 - "The train is angry because he has to wait. What should he do?"

- **Teach Emotional Vocabulary**
 - Start with basic emotions (happy, sad, mad, and scared).
 - As they grow, introduce more complex feelings like frustrated, jealous, proud, or nervous
- **Model Emotional Awareness:** talk about your own feelings
 - "I feel frustrated because we're running late, but I'm taking deep breaths to calm down."
 - "I'm feeling really happy because we get to spend time together!"
- **Use Art and Creative Activities:** encourage drawing or coloring to express feelings.

Ask:

- "Can you draw how you feel today?"
- "What color would your feeling be?"
- **Keep a journal or log of things to do when feeling upset for older children**
- **Focus on Body Cues:** teach children to connect physical sensations with emotions:
 - "Your fists are tight. Could that mean you're feeling mad?"
 - "Your face is all scrunched up—are you feeling upset?"
- **Videotape a Meltdown** and view it together when calm- empathize/ problem solve alternate ways to handle being upset
- **Practice Problem-Solving Together:** after identifying an emotion, help your child think about what to do next:
 - "You're feeling sad because you miss Grandma. What could we do to feel better?"
 - "You're mad because your block tower fell. Should we try building it again?"
- **Celebrate Emotional Awareness:** praise your child for recognizing and naming their feelings:
 - "That's great! You told me you're feeling frustrated. Now we can figure out what to do."