



5 Steps to Managing Difficult Emotions

Step 1: Emotions

The first step in managing difficult emotions is to understand what emotion(s) we are experiencing and what caused the emotion. Often as parents we want to jump to threatening consequences or controlling behavior. Helping children learn to manage their emotions will often stop the behavior before it starts. Help your child identify what emotion(s) they are feeling (*see emotional vocabulary on right*), what caused the emotion and how much emotion (*see the emotional scale below*). This can be done simply by asking, “What’s going on?” and then following up with simple questions. It is important that we show empathy for our children’s experiences and emotions. Remember our child’s reaction may not seem justified, but the feelings are real and can be very painful. Avoid judging their emotions or trying to teach lessons during this step. We will focus on responsibility during step 3.

Basic Vocabulary	Happy	Excitement	Love	Anger	Sadness	Fear
Expanded Vocabulary	Fulfillment Content Glad Complete Satisfied Optimistic Pleased	Ecstatic Energetic Aroused Bouncy Nervous Perky Antsy	Intimate Loving Warm-Hearted Sympathetic Touched Kind Soft	Irritated Resentful Cheated Upset Mad Furious Raging	Down Blue Mopey Grieved Dejected Depressed Heartbroken	Tense Nervous Anxious Jittery Frightened Panic Terrified

The emotional scale helps identify “how much” emotion a child is experiencing. The emotional scale uses a metaphor that provides visualization of emotions filling up the body. Emotions start at the feet and rise through the top of the head. Four identifying levels are provided: A Little, Some, A Lot and Too Much. This will help children gain a better understanding of their emotions. They will learn how to recognize when their emotions become more or less intense and when to use coping skills.

The Emotional Scale



Step 2: Coping Skills

Coping skills are techniques your child can use to calm heightened emotions. Some examples are given here on the emotion regulation drills poster. Other examples include deep breathing, counting, going for a walk, talking to a trusted person, getting a hug, playing a game or just going to their room for a while. If the child’s emotions are dangerously high, you may need to choose an activity that allows for good supervision. It’s important that children are given the time to calm down to at least “a little” emotion on the emotional meter before discussing consequences and pushing expectations. Once the child has calmed, move on to step 3 (Responsibility).

Step 3: Responsibility

Once the child’s emotions are under control we can begin discussing responsibility. To get a child on task you may ask, “Where are you supposed to be? Or What are you supposed to be doing?” Caregivers may need to help children meet expectations, but children should be responsible for helping themselves as well. You may also need to convey consequences for any behaviors that occurred when his/her emotions were out of control. Here is an example of a conversation, “We have been struggling all day. You have been yelling and disrespectful. You know I’m here for you and I love you, but it’s not SMART for me to let you go out with your friends tonight. We will do better tomorrow and hopefully you can go then.”

Step 4: Future

During this step caregivers provide “wisdom” regarding the child’s emotions and behaviors. Avoid long lectures. Just give a brief reminder about goals and your family’s values. Offer advice and plan for future events where emotions may become out of control again.

Step 5: Review

During this step caregivers should reinforce any positive behaviors observed. Give your child praise for the things he/she did well. If you are still frustrated from the child’s behavior give yourself some time and then come back and provide praise later. Here is an example of praising a specific behavior. “You’re doing a much better job managing your frustration when you don’t get what you want. It makes it a lot easier for me to tell you “no” when I need to. Thank you.”