



## "Use Your Words": Moving Beyond Tantrums to Express Challenging Emotions

By Shauna Tominey

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We were in the grocery store parking lot, and my two-year-old was in the middle of a tantrum. I let my daughter know that I was going to carry her to the car to keep her safe. Once the car door closed, I tried one of the strategies I learned as an early childhood teacher. I said out loud, "Let's take deep breaths together to calm your body down." Unfortunately, taking deep breaths was the last thing on my daughter's mind — she let me know through gasping sobs, "I DON'T WANT TO TAKE DEEP BREATHS! I DON'T WANT TO CALM DOWN!"

I knew my daughter couldn't think clearly in that moment, so we just sat in the car and waited through the tantrum. When my daughter had exhausted her tears, she turned to me for a hug. I hugged her back, letting her know that it was okay to have these feelings, but that I didn't like it when she tantrumed. Even though I kept calm, I couldn't help feeling a little helpless. I wondered what else I could be doing to help her express her emotions in other ways.

Teaching children how to express emotions effectively is a challenge that unites all caregivers. At birth, children only have a few ways to express their needs and these needs often come out in the form of emotions. For infants, emotions — like anger, sadness, fear or happiness — are expressed through impulses and instincts, such as crying, smiling or using their bodies. As children get older, we still want them to let us know when they need something, but we want them to do this by expressing their emotions in other ways, such as using signs or words to talk about their feelings.

For children, developing the skills necessary to choose how to express their feelings is the foundation of *emotion regulation* — the ability to respond to emotions in appropriate ways. Emotional regulation affects how your child manages the ups and downs of everyday life, including school readiness and the ability to form positive relationships.

Moving from hardwired impulses and instincts to talking about feelings is a monumental shift, however. This shift doesn't happen overnight — it takes language skills, brain development, positive role models, and *lots* of practice. Just because your child can say (or sign) how she's feeling, such as "I'm sad," "I'm angry," "I'm hungry," "I need a hug", doesn't mean she has the skills and self-control to express herself in this way all the time. This is especially true if she's tired, hungry, or worked up.

Just like learning to hold a pencil or singing the ABCs, expressing emotions takes skills that need to be practiced. When children hold a pencil upside down or scramble M-N-L-O-P, we smile. We might even take a picture or a video to share with family and friends. When children struggle to manage their emotions, our emotions get activated too. A tantrum can give rise to our own frustration, stress, or even embarrassment — especially if we are in a public place.

How can we help our children learn to express their emotions in new ways and keep calm during the process? There are many research-based strategies we can use to support our children in the moment. Try these strategies at home:

## **Talk about many different feelings.**

Let your child know that everyone has feelings and that all feelings are okay. Talk about what emotions feel like in your body and how your face looks when you have different feelings. Play guessing games where you take turns making faces or acting out different feelings and try to guess what they are.

## **Help children build strategies outside of emotionally-charged moments.**

When reading books or watching children's tv shows together, talk about the feelings that different characters are having: *How do you think they are feeling? How do you know they are feeling that way? What do you do when you have those feelings?* Use dolls, puppets or action figures to role-play different emotions and scenarios together. Talking about feelings outside of emotionally-charged



moments can help children practice the skills and language they need to manage their feelings during challenging moments.

## **Give your child options so they can choose how to act out their feelings.**

How do you want the people in your family to show or tell others when they feel angry, frustrated or sad? Is it okay in your family to stomp your feet or squeeze a pillow when upset? How about asking for a hug? Talking about your emotions and exploring different ways to express your feelings will give children (and adults!) ideas for what they can do when they have challenging feelings at home.

## **Model how you want your child to express different emotions.**

Children pick up on adults' emotions. Share your feelings with your child and explain what you are doing to manage your emotions (e.g., *"I'm feeling frustrated right now, so I need to have a little quiet time to calm down before I'm ready to talk about it."*)

## **Support your child's feelings in the moment.**

When children have challenging feelings, it's often hard for them to listen, pay attention, and learn. Give children the time and space they need to calm down. After your child has calmed down, talk about what happened and what they might do differently next time.

As parents and caregivers, it can be helpful to remind ourselves that learning to express our emotions in different ways takes practice. In fact, many of us are still practicing these skills as adults! Some need more practice and support than others and that's okay.

For my own daughter, I put these strategies into action. In recognizing how powerless I felt in the middle of a tantrum, I focused my energy on helping her practice talking about and expressing her feelings outside of emotionally-charged moments. I'll never forget the day, a few months later, when my daughter started feeling frustrated about something that she couldn't do on her own. Rather than falling apart, she turned to me and said, "Mom, I'm getting upset. Can I have a hug to calm my body down?" She crawled up in my lap and we held one another, rocked, and breathed. In that moment, I remember thinking to myself, "It's working!" With practice and support, my daughter was learning to manage her emotions — and so was I.

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