



Big Feelings for Kids: A Guide for Children and Grown-Ups

A feelings thermometer, calm-down choices, and parent guide · Created by Simar Gill Lowther, MACP, RP (CRPO)

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At a glance

- All feelings are okay. Some behaviours need limits.
- Children learn to manage big feelings by being helped through them first. This is called co-regulation.
- Naming feelings and having calm-down choices ready helps kids feel more in control.

For grown-ups: why big feelings are so big

The parts of a child's brain that help with calming down, planning, and self-control are still developing well into the teen years. That means children often feel emotions intensely and need help settling. When grown-ups stay calm and help name the feeling, children gradually learn to do it for themselves.

Emotion coaching in five steps

1. Notice the feeling, especially when it's small.
2. See it as a chance to connect and teach.
3. Listen and show you understand: "You look really frustrated."
4. Help name the feeling: "Is it disappointed? Angry? Both?"
5. Set limits if needed and help solve the problem together: "It's okay to be angry. It's not okay to hit. What can we do instead?"

For kids: my feelings thermometer

How big is my feeling right now? Point to the colour.

9-10 Exploding

Needs safety and quiet first

7-8 Very upset

Needs a grown-up close by

5-6 Upset

Needs a calm-down choice

3-4 A little upset

Can use words and ask for help

1-2 Calm

Ready to learn and play

What the research says

Children of parents who coach emotions, noticing, naming, and guiding feelings, show better emotional regulation and social skills (Gottman, Katz & Hooven, 1996).

The emotion-coaching program Tuning in to Kids improved parents' emotion coaching and reduced children's behaviour problems in a randomized trial (Havighurst et al., 2010).

Tool: My Calm-Down Choices

Kids: circle the ideas that help you, or draw your own.

Move my body	Calm my body	Get help
Jump 10 times	Smell the flower, blow out the candle (slow breaths)	Hug a grown-up
Run or dance	Squeeze a pillow or stress ball	Say, "I need help"
Push the wall hard	Wrap up in a blanket	Go to my calm spot
Stretch like a cat	Count to 10 slowly	Draw how I feel

For grown-ups: our family feelings plan

Where our calm spot will be and what's in it:

The words we'll use to name feelings:

What I'll do to stay calm myself:

How we'll reconnect after a big feeling:

Strategies to try

- **Practise when calm.** Children learn calming skills best when they're not upset.
- **Name your own feelings.** "I'm feeling frustrated, so I'm going to take three deep breaths."
- **Connect before correcting.** Calm the feeling first, then talk about behaviour.
- **Read feelings books together.** Stories help children learn emotion words.

Strategies you may not have heard of

These less common, evidence-informed techniques go beyond the usual advice. Try one at a time and notice what works for you.

- **Make the feeling a character.** Give the feeling a name, like "the Worry Monster" or "the Grumpy Cloud." Talking about the feeling as separate from the child reduces shame. This comes from narrative therapy.
- **Build a calm-down kit.** Fill a box with a stress ball, bubbles, a soft toy, crayons, and a feelings chart.
- **Play feelings detective.** While reading books, pause and ask, "How do you think this character feels? How can you tell?"
- **Use playful breathing.** Try "bubble breath" (slow exhale to blow a big bubble) or "volcano breath" (hands rise up, then slowly "erupt" down).

Journal prompts

Take your time with these. Write freely; there are no right answers.

How were big feelings handled in my family when I was a child?

Which of my child's feelings is hardest for me to stay calm with?

What helps me stay steady when my child is upset?

What do I want my child to learn about feelings?

When to reach out for support

If your child's big feelings are frequent, intense, or affecting school, friendships, or family life, a therapist who works with children can help. Our team supports children (6+), teens, and parents.

Insightful Journey Inc. offers therapy in person in Oshawa and virtually across Ontario, in English, Hindi, Punjabi, and Urdu. Direct billing available.

[Book a free consultation](#) · 647-982-2527 (call, text, or WhatsApp)

In crisis? Call or text 9-8-8, or call 911.

This resource is for education and self-reflection. It is not a diagnostic tool and is not a substitute for professional assessment or care.

References

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