

Managing big feelings in little people



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Managing big feelings

The best approach to effectively managing big emotions and meltdowns in young children is to plan ahead and not act in the moment. This can be done using the **WHAT, WHY, HOW** approach.

The **WHAT, WHY, HOW** approach means using strategies that are informed by how the nervous system works AND that are tailored specifically to your child.

**It's easy to do once you know
how!**

**WHAT
WHY
HOW**

1. Understanding **WHAT** is going on.
2. Mapping **WHY** it is happening.
3. Strategies for **HOW** to support your child.

Managing big feelings

What do the steps involve?

1. Understanding WHAT is going on.

The basics of the nervous system and how this influences your child's emotions and behaviour. The fight flight response and the prefrontal cortex.

2. Mapping WHY it is happening.

This part is all about prevention and working out things that trigger or lead to the big feelings in your child.

3. Strategies for HOW to support your child.

Tailored approaches to help calm, soothe and connect with your child.

WHAT
WHY
HOW

Step 1: Understanding WHAT is going on. The basics of the nervous system

The fight or flight response and prefrontal cortex

Exploring how the nervous system influences your child's emotions and behaviour can help us to respond more effectively.



The fight or flight response (downstairs brain)

Our nervous system has several mechanisms to respond to **stress and danger**, the fight or flight response is the one that is most relevant to understanding big feelings or meltdowns in young children.

The **fight flight response** is activated by the lower more primitive part of our brain that we can refer to as the '**downstairs brain**'. It involves the amygdala and other parts but there is no need to get too technical with all the parts! Let's just call it the downstairs brain.

The **downstairs brain** activates the fight or flight response when it perceives danger. The response is designed to make us able to fight or run away from a threat. When it is activated our **heart beats faster, our attention is narrow, muscles tense, our breathing becomes more rapid, we are more sensitive to sensory input and we will be more restless and alert.**

Importantly, **we cannot easily think, reason or use logic when our fight flight response is activated.** Thinking and reasoning is the job of the upstairs brain (prefrontal cortex), which can go offline when the fight flight response is activated.

This is why **it is completely ineffective to try and reason or even demand that a child stop this response. Threats, consequences and punishments will just make things worse.**

The fight or flight response (downstairs brain)

There doesn't have to be a real danger.

Because the fight or flight response is a primitive response, it does not have the capacity to detect the difference between: The wrong colour cup and a big dog or having to give up my toy versus a fire.

If a threat is detected the fight flight response will be activated regardless of how big or whether it is even real.

This part can be hard for adults because knowing that there is clearly no danger, it can be frustrating when a child is responding this way, it might feel like an overreaction or like defiance to you but for them it is a very real nervous system response and not deliberate.

In certain situations, it might also feel like the child could do better. If the child could do better, they would.

No one wants to have a meltdown, even children.

The fight or flight response (downstairs brain)

What activates the fight flight response in young children?

There are likely to be many things that activate the fight or flight response in your child, some of them you might not expect. Each child will have differences in what affects them.

Almost anything, but here are some common ones.

- Feeling disappointed or frustrated
- Feeling disconnected from loved ones
- Feeling left out or rejected
- Getting something wrong
- Not being allowed to do something and being told no (even when it seems reasonable!)
- Loud noises
- Water – showers, the ocean etc
- Separations (including bedtime)
- Having to share
- Strangers
- Changes
- The dark
- Hunger
- Animals and insects
- New foods
- Many more...



The prefrontal cortex (Upstairs brain)

The **prefrontal cortex** or **upstairs brain** is the front part of the brain where **thinking and reasoning** happens.

Our prefrontal cortex helps us to be **calm, engaged and focused**.

Since our prefrontal cortex **doesn't fully develop until at least 25 years of age**, it is much harder for little ones to manage and cope with stress.

This is why when the fight or flight response is activated, it is difficult (or impossible) to reason with your child!

You cannot reason with a child if their upstairs brain (prefrontal cortex) isn't online and connected with the downstairs brain.

The hand model of the brain created by Dan Siegel describes this as '**Flipping your lid**'.

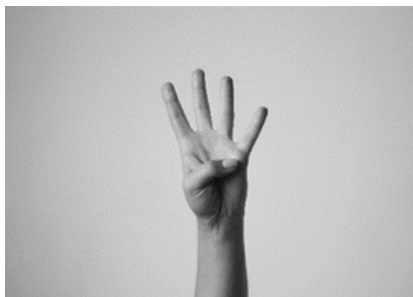
Learn about flipping your lid on the next page!

Flipping your lid

Imagine your hand as a fist, this is **your prefrontal cortex when it is connected with the downstairs brain** and coordinating urges, impulses and behaviour. **We can think, reason and use logic.**



When we **flip our lid** (fight flight activation), our **upstairs brain (prefrontal cortex) goes offline, leaving the downstairs brain in charge.**



This means we are in survival mode. In a young child that **could look like refusal to do something, kicking, screaming, biting, throwing things, running away, intense crying.** Kids sometimes look really driven and energised, rageful and/or completely irrational.

Here is a link to Dan Siegel explaining Flipping your Lid or you can google it

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gm9CIJ74Oxw>

Summary

Alright, so basically, our brains have this cool but kinda crazy system that helps us deal with scary stuff. There's an "upstairs brain" and a "downstairs brain." The downstairs one kicks in when we're freaked out, making our heart race, muscles tense, and focus super narrow. This is the fight or flight mode, designed to help us deal with danger by either fighting or running away.

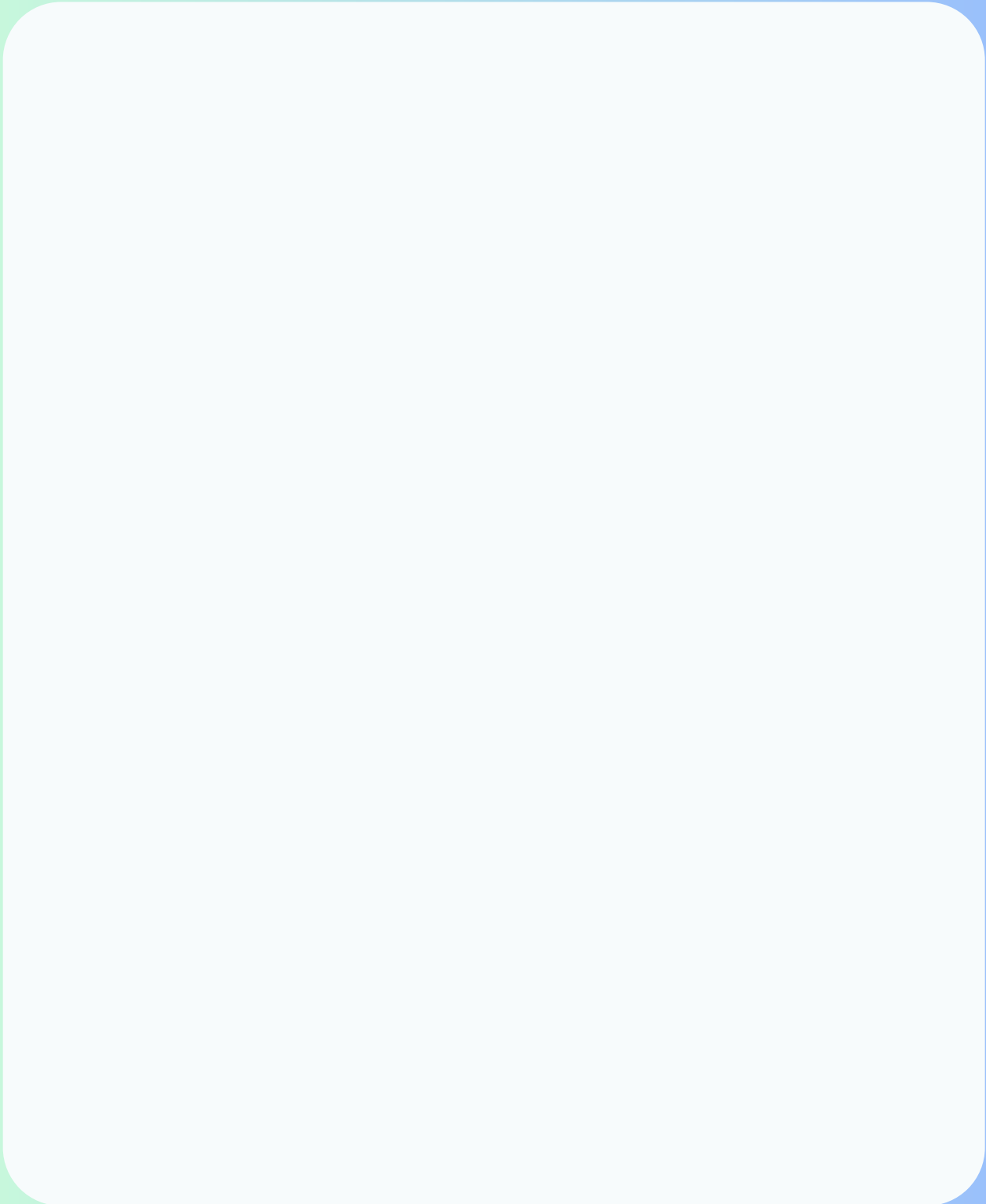
Thing is, when the downstairs brain takes over, the upstairs one, where all the logic and reasoning happens, goes offline. So trying to talk sense to a kid in the middle of a meltdown is like talking to a brick wall. It's not that they're being stubborn; it's just their brain's way of handling stress.

And get this, the downstairs brain doesn't care if the danger is real or not. It can freak out over something as small as the wrong color cup or as big as a monster under the bed. So, when a kid flips their lid, it could be triggered by anything from loud noises to feeling left out or even hunger.

Basically, understanding this brain stuff can help us be more patient with kids when they're acting out. They're not trying to be difficult, they're just dealing with their brain doing its thing.

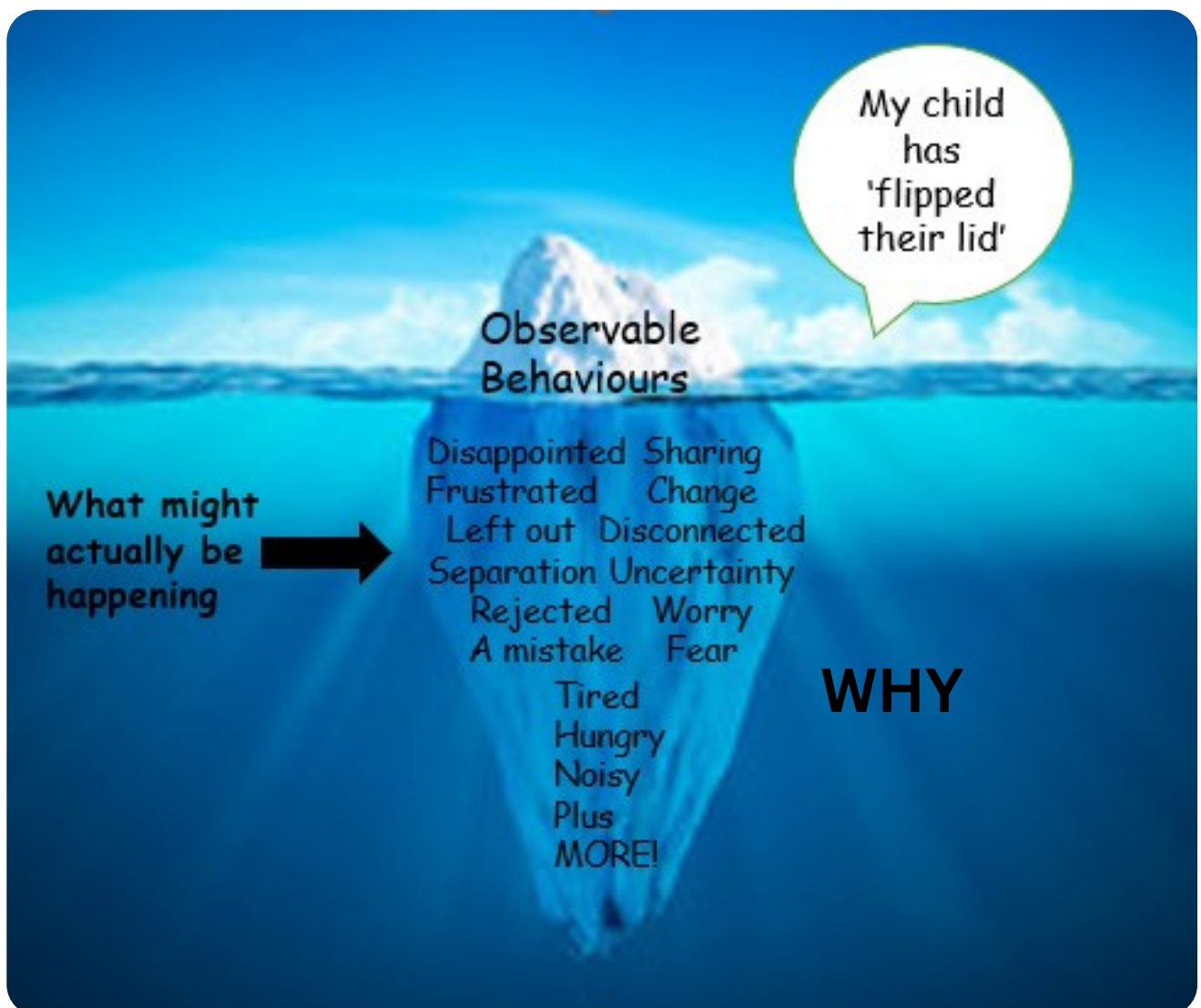


Step 1 notes



Step 2: Mapping my child's big emotions: The 'WHY' of the big feeling.

The first task in tackling big emotions in young children is better understanding **why** and when they flip their lid (what activates their fight flight response).



Step 2: Mapping my child's big emotions: The 'WHY' of the big feeling.

The next four pages:

- Big Feelings Map example
- Big Feelings Map for you to complete

Once you have created your big feelings map, you will be able to create a personalised plan for you and your child to reduce the likelihood of things getting to melt down point.



Mapping Big feelings

Feeling anxious,
scared or unsafe

EXAMPLE

My child ...
Is scared of bugs
Feels unsafe without his/her stuffed toy
Gets upset when someone shouts

Low on physical
resources like tiredness
and hunger

EXAMPLE

My child ...
Gets out of control when he/she is
tired Starts hitting when hungry

Being told 'no', being
asked to do
something

EXAMPLE

My child ...
Often has a meltdown when being asked to get ready
in the morning Is rude when told no and starts hitting

Poor frustration
tolerance and
disappointment

EXAMPLE

My child ...
Doesn't cope well when they don't know how to do
something
Struggles with sharing

Separations - being at
daycare, bedtime etc

EXAMPLE

My child ...
Gets wound up at bedtime
Screams at drop off

Changes and change
to routines

EXAMPLE

My child ...
Refuses to do new things
Melts down when we don't have time for tv at the usual time

I'm dysregulated - my
own nervous system is
activated

EXAMPLE

My child ...
Feeds off me. When I'm having a off day, they seem off
too Is really uncooperative when I'm short or shouty

Mapping Big feelings

Attention needing -
needing connection
and more time together

EXAMPLE

When I'm busy, my child always seems to play up
After daycare days, my child seems worse
Ever since I started back at work, my child is so demanding child
always seems to play up
After daycare days, my child seems worse

Sensory overwhelm -
too much noise,
scratchy clothes etc

EXAMPLE

My child ...
Seems to get wound up when theres lots of people
and noise
Gets very unreasonable if his/her clothes aren't right

Reinforcement - I
somehow reinforced
this response

EXAMPLE

MY child...
Hits his/her brother when he/she wants something. I have
reinforced this with my big reactions because I get frustrated and
and flip my lid, then they have a melt down.
The same thing happens with throwing toys.

Difficulty with
communication or
emotional literacy

EXAMPLE

My child/s ...
Isn't great at recognising he/she is feeling frustrated and just lashes
out.
Expressive communication is making it hard for him/her to get
their needs met, so then they lash out.

Mismatch of developmental
expectations - expecting
more than what they can do

EXAMPLE

I'm actually expecting way too much from My child when I think
about it. I know kids need support getting ready but then I expect
him/her to be able to do it all independently. I do the same with
tidying up.

Not feeling understood -
they are not feeling as
though I understand them

EXAMPLE

In the moment I want my child to see they are being
unreasonable but really, I'm not stopping to reflect on what is
happening for him/her. Do they really NEED to wear a tutu to
bed?! Even though it seems ridiculous, it is obviously very
important to them.

Something else

EXAMPLE

My child ...
Seems worse after I've done a night shift. I need to explore this
more.
Can't stand being sticky.
Struggles with games and turn taking.

Mapping Big feelings

Feeling anxious,
scared or unsafe

Low on physical
resources like tiredness
and hunger

Being told 'no', being
asked to do
something

Poor frustration
tolerance and
disappointment

Separations - being at
daycare, bedtime etc

Changes and change
to routines

I'm dysregulated - my
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Mapping Big feelings

Attention needing -
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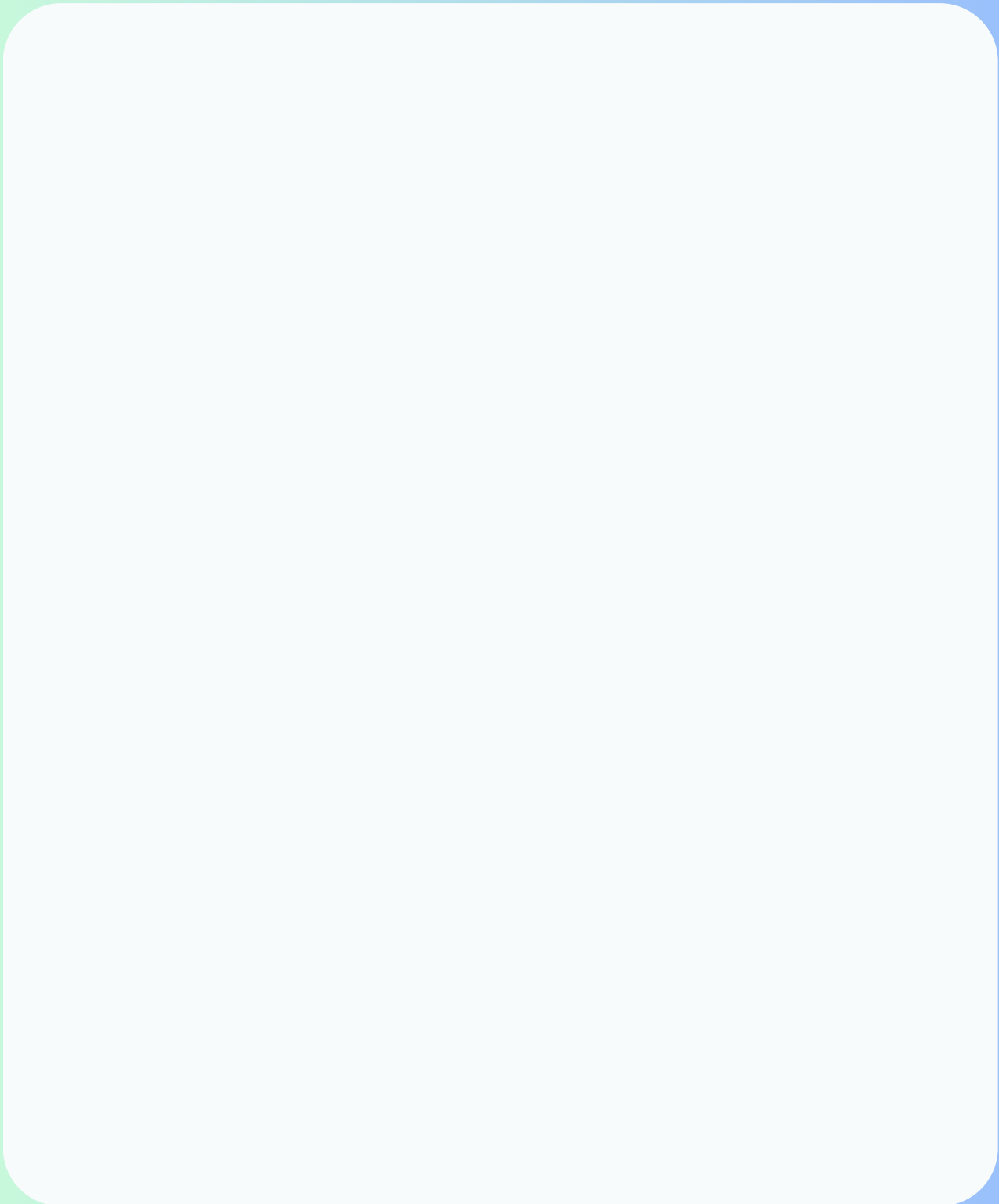
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Something else

Step 2 notes



Step 3: Strategies

HOW to SUPPORT your child

The main goal is to use strategies that will calm and soothe your child and help them to stay connected with you.

Pick out a few strategies here that you can practice and start there. Tailor them to your child's needs and temperament.

What to avoid:

- Avoid lots of 'no's', consequences and punishments. Just the word 'no' can flip a lid, instead try saying this like, 'furniture is for sitting on', 'we can have chocolate another time', it's as simple as dropping the word no.
- Avoid strategies that disconnect your child from you, these are things like refusing to talk to them or having them sit alone in their bedroom.

Aren't I being permissive if I focus on soothing them rather consequences?

Remember, we cannot easily think, reason or use logic when our fight flight response is activated. Thinking and reasoning is the job of the upstairs brain (prefrontal cortex), which can go offline when the fight flight response is activated. This is why it is completely ineffective to try and reason or even demand that a child stop this response.

Threats, consequences and punishments will just make things worse. Teaching and learning can only happen once the child's upstairs brain (and yours!) is online and connected to the downstairs.

Step 3: Strategies

What to do:

Stay connected:

Do your best to keep connected. If your child is welcoming of you being with them, sit with them, cuddle them and so on. If they are pushing you away, keep your distance but say things like 'I'm just here when you need me', 'I'm here if you want me' etc.

Name and validate the feeling:

Let your child know that you understand. For example:

'I know you really wanted a turn, that must be so disappointing',

'I can see you're really mad with me for not letting you have that biscuit',

'You seem really sad that it had to end'.

Get down low and give eye contact:

Adults are big and powerful. Get down low and give eye contact, it will help you stay calm and empathic, and your child will feel safe and more receptive to you.

Use a calm gentle voice:

Your child's nervous system co-regulates with yours, so keep calm, show calm and speak calmly, this will help them to soothe faster

Redirect and distract:

With young children, it is perfectly okay to redirect them if you can. Do what works. Ideas are: Go outdoors, a snack, a story, drawing, water play, music, bubbles.

More strategies on the next page!

Step 3: Strategies

What to do:

Use simple language:

Never use long wordy explanations when big feelings are about. Definitely avoid saying no or repeating the rules. Wait until later.

Add water:

Water has so many wonderful applications for coping with big feelings. Offer your child a cold drink, see if they will get in the bath or shower, try a cup of ice or ice block. Cold water can activate our calming system (parasympathetic nervous system) and reduce our heart rate. Most children find water calming and enjoyable.

Less making it stop and more being with your child:

Unless someone's safety is jeopardised, back off and give your child time to calm themselves. Too often we get caught up in what we expect them to be doing instead of helping them calm.

Time in:

Keep your child close, reassure them and offer comfort.

Avoid time out as this signals rejection and tells them you are not there for them at a time of distress.

It will pass:

Hold onto the fact that the moment will pass.



Step 3: Strategies

Other things to consider

Use the three R's:

Regulate - first focus on getting your child regulated

Relate - next reconnect with your child

Reason - then teach and explain

Learn about Shark Music:

You are going to be triggered by some things more than others. Learning about Shark Music will help you to **identify your triggers** e.g., mess, not sharing, not following rules.

Here is a link to a 5 minute clip where you can learn about Shark Music:

<https://vimeo.com/145329119> or just google 'Shark Music'.

Set boundaries and be consistent:

Kids cope best and feel safer when they know what to expect.

Comfort each other once it passes:

Big feelings take a lot out of everyone and can be distressing. Talk to your child and provide comfort. Comfort yourself.

Mentalisation:

This is our capacity to reflect and hold someone else in mind.

Try to think about what is happening from your child's perspective. How are they feeling? What do they need? Is this hard for them?



Help! I'm losing my cool

Take a moment:

Pause and step back. Imagine a STOP sign if you need to. **S**top, **t**ake a breath, **o**bserve, **p**ut it in perspective.

Three breaths:

One for the head, one for the heart, one for the body. Focus on a long exhale.

Get your parent self back online:

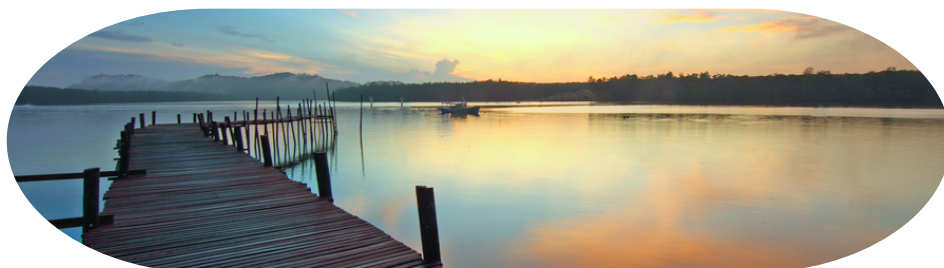
Your angry self isn't the right person for the job, connect with your parent self. What would they do?

Self-compassion:

Sometimes the only thing you have left in these moments is compassion for yourself and compassion for your child. Remind yourself that you are doing your best and that they are also doing their best.

Quick reset:

- Use the breathing application on your smart watch
- Place an ice cube on your forehead or back of neck
- Spell something you can see backwards e.g., table
- Wiggle your toes and notice your feet on the ground
- Count backwards from 100 by 7
- Splash ice cold water on your face
- An ice cold drink



step 3 notes