



Helping Pre-teens & Teenagers Calm Down

(The following article can be found at www.raisingchildren.net.au)

Pre-teens and teenagers often feel and express strong emotions. For example, they might feel really angry if something seems unfair, or really disappointed if something doesn't turn out the way they wanted.

These emotions can be overwhelming. At the same time, because of teenage brain development, teenagers don't always have the skills to think about things rationally. They might have trouble solving problems. They might also do things without thinking them through.

Pre-teens and teenagers might behave in these ways even if they had fewer difficulties in these areas when they were younger.

Your child's personality or particular circumstances like family changes or stress from schoolwork or relationships can also affect pre-teens' and teenagers' abilities to deal with emotions.

Learning to calm down is an important part of learning to understand and manage emotions for pre-teens and teenagers.

Helping pre-teens and teenagers calm down: five steps

Here are five steps to help your child calm down from a strong emotion:

1. Notice and identify the emotion.
2. Name and connect the emotion.
3. Pause and say nothing.
4. Support your child while they calm down.
5. Address the issue.

1. Notice and identify the emotion

If your child looks like they need help to calm down, stop. Pay attention to what your child's behaviour is telling you about their feelings before you do or say anything else.

Here are some ideas to help you identify your child's feelings:

- Try to stay calm and listen to what your child is saying. For example, if your child does badly on an assessment, they might be feeling disappointed. But they might complain that the teacher hates them or that their chores don't give them enough time to study.
- Try 'standing in their shoes' by remembering or imagining yourself in a similar situation. For example, you might think about how you feel when you make a mistake at work.
- Be patient. You might need a lot of practice to identify your child's emotions.

2. Name and connect the emotion

The second step is to label the emotion and connect it with the event. For example, 'I think you might be feeling frustrated and disappointed with that grade'. This helps your child understand what they're feeling and why. It also helps them understand what happens in their body when they feel this way.

Labelling the emotion also shows your child that you understand how they feel and that this emotion is OK, even if their behaviour isn't OK.

It can be hard for your child to work out what the emotion is when they're very upset, particularly if they're still learning to identify their emotions. That's why it's best to label the emotion rather than asking about it. So you might say, 'You seem really angry' rather than 'Are you feeling angry?'

3. Pause and say nothing

Pausing and saying nothing for a few seconds gives your child time to take in what you've just said. It's hard not to jump in and start talking. You might find it helps to count slowly to five in your head while you wait.

This pause might be enough for your child to calm down. Or they might solve the problem for themselves. For example, 'I think I didn't put much effort into studying. I'll put more effort into the next assignment'.

Also, a pause can sometimes give your child time to think more about why they're feeling the strong emotion. If they want to talk through their thoughts, you might need to wait a little longer.

4. Support your child while they calm down

If your child is very upset, they might need more time to calm down. For example, they might keep shouting or acting out physically. Or they might shut themselves in their room or leave the house.

Here's what to do if your child needs more time:

- Make sure that they're safe, you're safe and the people around you are safe.
- Get someone to help you if you need it – for example, your partner, if you have one.
- Stay calm. Stay close to your child if it's safe to do so. Staying close shows your child that you understand and that you can handle whatever their emotions are. It also helps them understand that emotions don't have to be overwhelming.
- Wait for the strong emotion to pass. Be patient. Your child is more likely to calm down if you stay calm and accept their emotions.
- Give your child some space if they want it, but let them know you're close by – for example, 'I'm just going to sit outside your door'.
- If your child leaves the house, match your response to your child's age and maturity. For example, you could follow them, let them 'walk it off' for a few minutes then call them, or just wait for them to come back.
- If your child's emotions don't seem to be passing, go back to step 1 – for example, 'I can see you're really furious about this'.

It's tempting to say things like 'Why don't you go for a walk?' or 'Try taking some deep breaths'. But your child might not be able to respond to these suggestions until their emotions have passed. It's often best just to wait and send the message that you're there if they need you.

It's important to let your child know that it's OK to feel strong emotions. When your child is calm, you might need to help your child understand the difference between the emotion and the behaviour. For example, 'It's OK to feel frustrated and disappointed. But it wasn't OK to swear at me and kick the wall'.

5. Address the behaviour or problem-solve

Your child needs to calm down before you can help them solve a problem or change a behaviour you don't like. What you do after your child has calmed down will depend on the situation – for example, what caused the outburst and how your child was behaving.

Here are some suggestions:

- If it's appropriate, ask your child whether they want some help with problem-solving. The first step in problem-solving is to identify the problem. For example, 'You have two big assignments due next Wednesday'.
- If your child is upset about a rule that you won't or can't change, acknowledge your child's emotions but avoid a debate. For example, 'I know you're angry because you can't go to that party. But we're not comfortable with you attending parties where there's no adult supervision'.

- If your child is behaving in physically or verbally harmful ways, let them know this behaviour is unacceptable. For example, 'It's not OK to speak to me like that', or 'We'll have to patch and paint that hole in the plaster this weekend. The cost of the materials will come out of your pocket money'.
- Give your child comfort and reassurance if they need it. For example, 'That was a scary thing to happen' or 'I'm sorry to see you so sad. Would you like a hug?'

Autistic teenagers who show aggressive behaviour and teenagers with ADHD often need extra support to cope with strong feelings and control their impulses. Your child's therapist can give you ideas for strategies that might help.

Getting help

If you think your child needs more help dealing with their feelings, start by talking to their GP. The GP can help you find support for your child, which might include seeing a counsellor or psychologist. A school counsellor might also be able to help.

These professionals can also recommend parenting programs that can help you learn more about teenagers' emotions.

You're best able to help your child with their emotions when you're calm yourself. Staying calm also gives you the chance to be a positive role model for managing emotions. Looking after yourself, especially your physical and emotional wellbeing, can help you stay calm around strong emotions.