

How to talk to your child when they're highly emotional

One of the hardest jobs for a parent to do is to talk to your child when they are angry and upset.

There are two common mistakes that we make when kids are angry.

First mistake is talking or shouting over an emotionally-charged child or teen. Usually this drives up anger rather than diffuses it. The reptilian brain (our old brain) generally takes over when children are angry so they'll either take flight (shut down, run away, go to their room) if they perceive a challenge or they'll fight (argue, shout, get more upset).

The second mistake involves parents talking too softly or passively, which can be perceived by an angry or upset child or teen as not being taken seriously. There are times when a calm "I can see you're upset, darling" just won't cut it.

Kids of all ages when they've been genuinely upset want one thing from you as a parent or teacher – they want to know that you understand them; that you get that they are feeling hurt, embarrassed or rejected or whatever has lead to their

anger. A genuine, empathetic 'I get it' has a powerful effect on a highly-charged child or teen.

So let's take a look at what to do.

Manage your reactivity first (practise)

High emotion can be contagious. We can easily be upset or angry at the person or the incident that caused our child to be angry or upset. Alternatively, the strength and manner of our child's emotion can be highly upsetting in itself so we react to quell the emotion. It's vital that we manage how we react to our child's emotion so that we can provide an effective, **empathetic** response.

The best way to manage your own reactivity when kids are upset is to **breathe**. Yes, breathe. This will help you regain control and remain calm. You need to feel comfortable with silence to do this successfully. You may even have to move away from the source of stress (that is, your upset child) momentarily to enable you to remain calm. This includes stepping away, closing your eyes, looking elsewhere so that you don't get caught in the contagious nature of your child's high emotion.

Talk your child's emotion down

Picture your child coming home from school fuming about an injustice that happened during the day. On an emotional

scale from 1 to 10 where one is passive and ten is out of control your child is an eight. He is screaming that he hates that "so and so" teacher and he'll never go back to her class again. Match your child's outburst by responding just below his emotional intensity – at a seven. "Yep, that's really upsetting. I don't blame you for being upset." It's essential that you say it strongly – just **below** the volume and intensity of his original outburst.

Your child will probably continue with his angry outburst but more likely at a lower level of intensity. He may say at level 6: "Yes, I hate him. He's always picking on me." This time reflect back how he's feeling but do so at level 5 of intensity. "You are upset. You have every right to be as it can be awful when you are treated unfairly." Don't take sides. Don't challenge your child's views. Just reflect back his feelings letting him know you understand something has upset him.

Your child may respond again but hopefully his emotional intensity is at 4. "He's been picking on me all term. I don't know why he doesn't like me." Again, respond by going just under his level of intensity. "It's natural to get upset when people don't treat you fairly. I get that" You are getting closer to talking about the issue. But don't discuss the issue or problem until your child and you are calm. In many cases, that may mean putting some time and space between managing the emotion and counselling to find the solution.

Be happy that you've helped your child calm down while maintaining a good relationship with him.

Practice makes us better parents

This technique I've just described is a powerful strategy that you can use to talk down children's emotions when they are upset. It's an advanced parenting and teaching technique (I'll be covering this and others in our new Parenting Emotionally-Intelligent Kids online Course to be released in May) that requires practice, practice and more practice!

Start by practising in non-stress situations. Listen to your child and partner speak and purposefully match their emotional intensity. Practise going below and above their baseline and watch how their responses will begin to go up and down accordingly.

Then try talking your child's emotions down when they are upset. Stay calm. Match their level. Talk them down. Don't give up if you mess up. Great parenting skills don't come with ease but they are so worth their weight in gold when we have them.

You've got to keep sharpening those skills!

Have you enrolled in our [Parenting Anxious Kids](#) course yet? It will show you how to respond, rather than react to kids' emotions and anxieties.

