



## Understanding and Responding to Your Child's Emotions

These are certainly unique times that we are all encountering. With school, work, and community closures all around us, there are many changes that families are facing. This will undeniably place increased stress on caregivers. While this sheet includes some helpful tips for managing emotions and behaviours in your children during this time, please know that it is not expected that you master all of these, nor is it possible for you to implement a perfect system at home. We recognize that caregivers are doing their best to adapt given these extraordinary circumstances.

### **1. Expect emotional and behavioural changes.**

Changes in routine and structure are difficult for many children. This time may be confusing for kids. Many will experience a range of heightened emotions, from excitement over spending more time at home with their parents, to sadness over not being able to go to school and see their friends, to anger or frustration about new rules or limits being set at home. These emotions are likely to be accompanied by associated changes in behaviour, including increased restlessness, irritability, or acting out to name a few. Be assured that these changes are normal and expected given the circumstances, and are not a reflection of your parenting skills but rather a reflection of an extraordinarily unique time in our society.

### **2. Normalize your child's emotions.**

Anxiety and frustration are normal responses to uncertainty as well as change in rules and structure – for parents and for children. Normalizing your child's emotions by letting them know that you understand why they are worried can help your child feel seen and heard.

### **3. Model confidence.**

This will undoubtedly be a complicated time for most parents. It would be normal for parents to experience their own increases in anxiety at a time like this, particularly with the added stress of school cancellations, working from home, or potential uncertainties regarding job and financial security. While heightened parental anxiety is expected, be mindful of how this manifests around your child. Children pick up on the emotions of others. As much as possible, model confidence so they feel like the adults have got this under control.

### **4. Describe what you're observing.**

Verbally describing changes you are noticing in your child's behaviour can help them feel seen. These statements should be made non-judgementally and are intended to simply let the child know that you are noticing what they are doing. Examples of these statements include:

“You are really pacing back and forth”

“You have lots of energy right now”

“Your voice is going up up up!”

### **5. Sit with, don't rescue from.**

It is normal to want to make your child feel better when they are experiencing big emotions. Instead of trying to immediately “rescue” them from their feelings with common statements such as “it will be okay” or “don't worry,” try to instead start by simply reflecting their feelings back to them. While there is a time and place for reassurance, showing a child that you can “ride the wave” of emotions *with* them will let them know that it is okay and safe for them to express their feelings.

## 6. Reflect your child's feelings.

Part of sitting with your child's feelings is reflecting their feelings back to them. The goal is to be empathic and to let your child know that you see and hear them. Examples of statements that reflect feelings are:

"You are really worried right now"

"You are so angry that you can't go to your friend's house"

"That made you really sad"

"This is really hard for you"

"You are very frustrated with all these changes"

## 7. Hook into their physiology to co-regulate.<sup>1</sup>

Co-regulation involves modeling, especially with young children. When responding to your child, try to match their affect in your initial response, then model bringing your voice/tone/body language down in the rest of your response.

Example: Your child throws their arms and screams "I don't want to go to bed!!!"

Response: "You don't want to go to bed!" (*match tone, throw arms in same manner*)

... "because you're not tired..." (*stated with slightly reduced tone and body language*)

... "it's not fair..." (*stated with even more reduced tone and body language*)

... "and your favourite show is on." (*stated with calm*)

## 8. Set limits.

Changes in routine and structure can often lead to increased behavioural problems. While we want to take an empathic approach by reflecting feelings, we also need to set limits. This communicates that it is okay for a child to feel any way they want to feel (angry), but it's not okay for them to act any way they want to act (throwing, kicking). Use A-C-T limit setting:<sup>2</sup>

A – Acknowledge the feeling

C – Communicate the limit

T – Target alternatives

*Examples:*

A – "Johnny, I know you are really **angry** that TV time is over....

C – ... but **the remote is not for throwing**...

T – ...you can **throw your stuffies** or you can **yell into the pillow**."

A – "Sam, I know you are really **excited** about your art project...

C – ... but **the table is not for drawing on**...

T – ... you can **draw on the construction paper** or you can **draw on this box**."

*Limit Setting Tips:*

- This isn't a magic strategy – don't be discouraged if it doesn't work the first time. Try restating the limit using ACT a few times before responding how you normally would.
- Try to target multiple alternatives. The purpose of ACT limit setting is to teach children what they can do. Providing them with alternative behaviours helps show them a more appropriate way to express their feelings.
- If your child has certain patterns of behaviours (e.g., slamming/kicking doors when electronics are taken away), it can be helpful to plan out how you will respond using A-C-T response in advance.

<sup>1</sup> Based on principles of Emotion Focused Family Therapy (EFFT). For more information: <https://www.mentalhealthfoundations.ca/>

<sup>2</sup> From Gary Landreth's Child Parent Relationship Training (CPRT). For more information: <http://www.parentingpurposefully.com/>