

Stop crying or I'll give you something to cry about!

We are emotional creatures and so are our children. When they have an emotional outburst over something, it can drive us crazy. I am often asked "how long should I allow my child to express her emotions before I send her to her room to whine." My answer is, avoid stopping the expression. But even parents who do the right thing and support a child in expressing her emotions have this thought that there should be a limit to how long they can do the expressing.

Children have extended outbursts of emotional expression for a reason and parents should avoid getting annoyed and angry with the child. The parent oftentimes even has the power to create them. I suggest that parents not limit the outbursts unless it is in public and is interfering with others. And only then, the child should be removed in a loving and peaceful manner to a place where they can continue the meltdown without disturbing others. The parent should not talk except to acknowledge what the child might be feeling by saying something like "you look frustrated," or "you look like your mad at mom." If the tantrum is happening at home the parent should leave the room as long as she has no safety issues leaving the child alone. If the parent feels that the emotional outbursts are lasting longer than they should, she should consult the child's pediatrician or a therapist for help.

Teaching a child to simply not dwell on things can also be beneficial and it is HOW you do it that is the key. Getting a child (or even an adult) to stop focusing on an emotion cannot be accomplished successfully through force or control; there are far more effective and healthier ways of accomplishing this goal. Control might get a child to stop dwelling on it for the moment, but the result is that whatever it is they are feeling (and it might be a totally different emotion than what the caregiver actually sees) will get stuffed and attempt to resurface at a later time. Or the child will feel resentment toward the caregiver for forcing the stuffing, thereby creating a NEW emotion that didn't exist before. The most important question the caregiver should ask them self before attempting to stop the dwelling, is "why is it occurring." Sometimes young children appear to be dwelling on something familiar to them, such as a boo-boo, when in fact, the emotion is completely different and one the parent had no clue about.

While waiting to begin a training session with preschool teachers late one afternoon, I watched a mother enter the school and interact with her preschooler as she was picking her up to take her home. The little girl rushed to her mother almost in tears and exclaimed, "Mommy, I have a boo-boo." Having been through my parenting class (and feeling under the pressure to do it right with me standing nearby), the mother got down to her little girl's eye level, acknowledged her feelings and said, "It looks like your finger might hurt." The little girl put her hand down and then seemed to be searching the room. She focused on a set of toys in the corner of the room and then said, "No... they wouldn't let me play with those toys today!" The mother then looked over at the toys and

said, "You look disappointed that you couldn't play with your favorite toys." The little girl was silent for just a moment and then began to cry as she said, "No... I wanted daddy to pick me up today." Mom then said, "You look like you miss daddy." The little girl nodded and fell into her mother's embrace. I later learned that daddy had made a promise to his daughter that morning that he would pick up the little girl on this one particular day, but a long meeting forced him to call his wife to pick up the child. The little girl's feeling of disappointment started with a boo-boo and then jumped to the toys, both with histories of emotion for her that were familiar. It may have been difficult for her to get her arms around the missing daddy feeling.

Identifying and handling emotions can be difficult for children. They feel this thing inside of them and it can be frightening. That's why I always coach parents into helping their child identify the problem by simply telling them what the parent sees from their perspective. They should not assume they know what it is, just tell them what they see. This acknowledgment should also include mirroring back the expression that the parent sees. The parent can say things like, "you look like you miss your brother," or "you look like you're mad at mommy." A parent (or teacher) can also get a child to stop dwelling on it by not dwelling on it themselves. The child looks to the parent's balanced reaction as a way of helping them with self-regulation of their emotional state.

Parents can teach their children how to self-regulate themselves so that when the emotion rises up in the future, they will be more prepared to deal with it. When they sense the arousal from the emotion, they will be motivated to reach for their blanket to comfort them. If they sense the arousal of fear over seeing a frightening image or interaction in front of them, they will be able to manage themselves by averting their eyes or moving to another location. In the end, experts state that people who are taught as children to self-regulate their emotions when they sense the awareness of distressing arousal, are more likely to have healthier social relationships, act out appropriately, and demonstrate less aggression.

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