

Outbursts: The 10 Rules of Dealing with an Angry/Frustrated Child

1. Don't yell or challenge your child when he's angry

Many times parents deal with angry outbursts by challenging their child and yelling back. But this will just increase your feeling of being out of control. The best thing you can do is remain calm in a crisis.

Don't challenge your child when he's angry—that's just like throwing a match onto a pile of firecrackers. Just wait until he calms down.

2. Don't try to reason with your child when he's in the middle of a tantrum, tirade or angry outburst

Many parents fall back on logic when their child is angry. After all, as adults, we reason through things to defuse tense situations. This is always a challenge with children because they don't have the same capacity to stop and reason like we do. So when you're dealing with your angry child, you have to leave that verbal place where you feel pretty comfortable and use different techniques. Saying, "Why are you mad at me? You were the one who forgot your homework at school," will only make your child angrier. Instead, wait until he calms down and then talk it through later.

3. Pay attention to your physical reactions

It's important to watch your physical reactions because your senses will tell you "Yikes, I'm in the presence of somebody who is very upset." You'll feel your heart start beating faster because your adrenaline will be heightened. Even though it's difficult, the trick is to act against that in some way and try to stay calm. Remember, you're lending your children your strength in these moments; you're showing them how to handle anger. By staying calm, you're not challenging your child by yelling back and engaging in a power struggle; this only escalates the tension. And paying attention to your own reactions will also help your child pay attention to himself because he won't need to worry about you or your emotions. When you don't respond calmly, your child will work even harder at his tantrum to try to get you to pay attention. So you really have to tap into some solid parenting skills to handle the outburst quickly and effectively.

4. Don't get physical with your child

Remember, if you get physical with your child, among other things, you're just teaching him to solve his problems with aggression.

5. Don't freeze up

Some parents freeze up when their child throws a tantrum or starts screaming at them. The parent is emotionally overwhelmed and becomes paralyzed with indecision or gives in to the child. If you're this type of person, you may find that sometimes your child will get angry on purpose to engage you; they'll bait you by throwing a fit or saying something rude, because they know that this will cause you to give in. So your job is to *not* take the bait—don't get angry, and don't give in.

Parents sometimes have a tendency to renegotiate with their child in these situations. Often, they're having a hard time managing their own emotions and so they don't know how to coach their child properly in that moment. But remember, if you give in and renegotiate, even every once in a while, you're teaching your child that it's worth it to act out. Instead, let them calm

down and try to coach them to use their problem-solving skills later. Once you start doing that, you're not passive. You are making a conscious choice to not get into an argument. You're saying, "I'm not going to renegotiate; I'm going to be calm." Although it may not seem like it on the surface, all of those choices are actions—you are making a choice not to give in.

6. Give consequences for the bad behavior, not for the anger

When your child throws a tantrum, starts screaming and really loses it, make sure you give him consequences based on his behavior and not on his emotions. For example, if your child calls you a foul name during his angry outburst, give him a consequence later for that infraction of the rules. But if all he does is stomp into his room and yell about how life isn't fair, I would let that go. Children get angry just like we do; they need to feel that they have a safe place to let off steam. As long as they're not breaking any rules, allow them to have that time to be angry.

7. Don't give overly harsh punishments

Giving harsh punishments in the heat of the moment is a losing proposition. Here's why: Let's say your child is angry. He's having a tantrum and shouting and screaming at you. You keep saying, "If you don't get it together, I'm going to take away your Wii for a week. Okay now it's two weeks. Now it's a month...do you want to keep going?" But to your dismay, your child keeps escalating; the more you try to punish him in order to force him to stop and get control of himself, the worse he gets.

We have a name for that kind of discipline: It's called "consequence stacking." What's really happening here is that the parent is losing emotional control. It is hard to tolerate it when your child is upset—we don't like it. But what you want to try to ask yourself is, "What do I want my child to learn?" And the answer might be, "I want him to learn how to not throw a fit every time he has to do something he doesn't want to do. I want him to learn that when he gets upset, there's an appropriate way to get out of it." The worst thing you can do is join him and get upset yourself. Harsh punishments that seem never-ending to your child are not effective, and will only make him angrier in that moment.

8. Take a break

Often, people will say they take a break and do something on their own for a little while until they can calm down and talk it through. This technique also works with your child, but parents often don't think of it because they feel they should have control over their child. But remember, when somebody is angry, you can't reason with them and you can't rush it. The bottom line is that if you stay there in that anger and keep engaging each other, it will not go away—it will just get bigger. So take a break and come back and interact with each other later when everyone is calm.

9. Role model appropriate responses when you're angry

Parents should try to role model dealing with their own anger appropriately in front of their children. What are some good ways to do that? Say, "I'm getting frustrated—I'm going to take a break." or "I can't talk to you right now; I'm really upset so I'm going to wait until I'm calm. I'm going to come back and we'll talk later". Admitting that you're angry and you need some time to calm down is not a weakness; it takes a lot of strength to say these words out loud. Remember, you're teaching the lesson of how to manage your anger, and that's exactly what you want your child to learn.