

The core issue

Young children often do not fully understand what is going on internally, especially when they are feeling overwhelmed or stressed. They need their parents and carers to help them make sense of their internal feelings and support them to work out how to fix things and feel better inside.

Children often have difficulty fully understanding what the internal issue or need really is. They just know they feel and sometimes these feelings can become overwhelming. Most children can't sit down and calmly tell their adults that they are having big feelings. Instead, they signal this through behavior. Sometimes these develop into behaviours that have a significant impact on those around them, however it is rarely the child's original intent to feel this way or to hurt or scare others. It can often be hard for families to figure out what is wrong especially in the face of such big reactions, and families can easily fall into a pattern of the child escalating and the rest of the family responding to this without ever fully understanding or addressing the original need. As adults, we need to work together with our children to understand what is going on for them and to help them to develop skills to address issues before they become big and ugly.

Partnering with our children

Helping a child to develop insight is the key here, as children need our assistance to learn these skills. We cannot expect them to come already equipped with these skills. They need our help and support to develop them, and this is done through ongoing, in the moment, day by day reflective conversations. Over time, both adult and child understand things better – the adult anticipates where there may be a problem and what is needed, and the child in turn benefits from this knowledge and insight into themselves. Over time, the child will only need a prompt or a point in the right direction to know what to do to avoid a major meltdown.

Recognise and celebrate growth

Note the key word here is "growth" and not "success"! Whilst our aim is to get to the end point, it is the journey of insight into self and realising different choices that is important. So when a child stops and thinks for a minute instead of impulsively kicking the cat or punching the wall, this is growth and it needs to be celebrated. He may still be yelling, but there was a shift from the previous behaviour and a slightly altered choice which we need to recognise. "Hey I noticed that you thought about punching the wall but you stopped yourself! Well done! Maybe one day we will get to no yelling as well".

Conversations about "Making the problem bigger vs making the problem smaller"

This is a great conversation to have with children. We are trying to help them to see that they do have choices, and that some of their choices will be more helpful (i.e. make the issue they are dealing with smaller) versus other choices that will only make things worse all round. It recognises that we will always have issues to deal with, but that we can do things that will help us when this occurs. Sometimes a poor choice in the beginning, creates a snowball of subsequent poor choices, and this is what we want to avoid. We want children to see that there are generally multiple choice moments, and that making a good choice at any of these moments will change what happens next and turn things into a better direction.

So a reflective conversation may go something like this:

- "I wonder if you were feeling anxious this morning because today was sports day?" (*helping the child to see the initial trigger point: sports day = different = uncomfortable = stress*),
- "I know that's stressful for you?" (*empathy with how the child was feeling – helping them to see you understand them*),
- "Do you think it made the problem bigger or smaller when you did not want to get ready?" (*encouraging reflection*),
- "I wonder how I can help you next time to make a different choice?" (*help child to see that there are other choices and you can help, explore options and how to signal these in the moment*).

Start with success moments

Start with success moments if at all possible – no matter how small they may be. Any moment where a child makes a better choice than they may have previously should be highlighted and acknowledged. If these are hard to find, try with less confronting issues before tackling the harder ones. Get the child used to having the conversation and exploring the issues. We want to help the child to see that we are there to help them and that this process is a useful one.

Talk together rather than lecture

No child enjoys a lecture. We can guarantee that they will tune out if this is the tone of the conversation and then we have lost our opportunity to teach. We need to be hopeful, to "figure things out" together, to "wonder out loud" and help the child to stay with us in the discussion. Remember also that not every "discussion" is a complete lesson. It is the repeated, day by day, moment by moment joining together that is where the learning occurs. You are in this for the long haul, so be patient.

Engage the senses – draw pictures, sit close together, laugh and joke, etc.

The conversation will have far more impact if the whole child is engaged and they can see that this is a helping and supporting experience. It is not about you being cross with them, it is about giving words to what they are feeling on the inside, letting them know you understand, and helping them to know what options they have when they feel this way that will be helpful. Some things to help with this could be:

- Have a pen and paper and draw the story – no need to be an artist, but the visual representation will help it to stick for the child.
- Sit together and take time over the story.
- Engage the child's eyes with yours, not in a stern "I'm cross with you!" way, but to show warmth, understanding and support.
- Talk in a soft voice (not your angry frustrated one – they will stop listening if this is the case).
- Have fun – not at the child's expense or belittling them, but connecting with them. Not every teaching moment needs to be serious!

Pick your moment

Having a discussion in the heat of an escalation is not likely to create a positive teaching moment. Rather, it is more likely to switch the child off with statements like "I hate you!" or "You don't care about me!". This in turn is likely to make you angry in the process, and then neither of you are engaged in a positive direction.

For a conversation to be reflective, it needs to happen when things are calm. It does not need to be long, it could just be a 'food for thought statement' such as "Mmm, I wonder if another choice may have made the problem smaller?", or to another adult in the room "I think Sam did not mean to make things bigger by [his action]. I wonder if next time he chose to [alternative] then things may have gone better". "I wonder how we can help him to remember to do that next time?".

Other times it may be a longer unpacking with the child, helping them to see and understand the impact of what happened to both them and to others and what the alternatives may have been. "I wonder how the cat felt when he was kicked?", "I wonder how that made you feel after?", "I wonder if punching the wall made the problem bigger or smaller?" "Lets draw what happened - it ended with a hole in the wall, I wonder what happened before that?", "I wonder how we can help you next time you are feeling frustrated like that?".

If the child finds it too confronting to be directly involved in the discussion, have the discussion with another adult for the child to listen to. But remember this is not a blaming exercise (i.e. "How many times does it take for you to learn"). It is not intended to shame the child but to engage them in a supportive way to develop alternative responses in the future.

Consequences

Whilst it is important to be reflective, there will still be moments in the learning process when consequences are needed. When these sit alongside the above reflective discussions however, they will be far more effective than just a consequence on their own.

Consequences always need to be delivered calmly and with little fuss. The child may not like it and may well protest in the moment, however with reflective conversations, they will come to understand that you are being fair and reasonable and that you are not intending to be mean to them but wanting to help them to grow and learn.