

Helping Children Cope with Difficult Situations

Children are not born with the ability or understanding to navigate challenging situations on their own. Experiences such as separation anxiety, disagreements with peers, overwhelming feelings of anger or fear, and communication struggles can be overwhelming for children to manage on their own.

Skills like problem-solving, managing conflicts, handling big emotions, and controlling impulses are learned with the guidance and support of trusted adults. Professionals must understand their role in helping children develop these social skills to ensure success at home and at school. It is only through consistent and patient modeling and guidance from adults that children can learn how to cope with difficult situations.

In this section you will learn two strategies for helping children cope with difficult situations. For each strategy there is:

- A brief description of the strategy
- Anticipated benefits
- Easy to follow considerations
- Follow-up activity

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2 Strategies for Helping Children Cope with Difficult Situations

- Supporting Children in Moments of Conflict and Frustration
- Fostering Self-Regulation through Co-Regulation

Supporting Children in Moments of Conflict and Frustration

Young children are not born with the ability to understand other people's perspectives and how to problem-solve when conflict arises. They rely on caring adults to develop those social skills and need continued support to manage their emotions and actions in situations that frustrate them.

Benefits:

1. Children learn to manage their feelings and their own behavior.
2. Children build on social skills and develop positive peer relationships.
3. Children feel capable and develop a sense of mastery.

Feelings of frustration and conflict are common experiences for young children. Those moments of conflict and frustration can arise for a variety of reasons that that may include:

- Facing obstacles or limitations of their abilities
- Social interactions with peers
- Social interactions with adults
- Inability to express their wants, needs, and feelings verbally
- Changes in routine or too many transitions

CONSIDERATIONS FOR SUPPORTING CHILDREN IN MOMENTS OF CONFLICT AND FRUSTRATION

1. When helping children, use a calm and neutral tone of voice so as not to contribute to an already emotionally charged situation.
2. Set clear and consistent expectations and limits for children.
3. Offer children the "minimum help" needed to resolve the situation this lets children know you are confident in their abilities but are also available to help before they get too frustrated.
4. Teach children healthy ways to manage frustration, such as taking deep breaths, asking children to use be-by-myself spaces in the room and seeking out the caregiver for support.
5. Provide emotional support by offering comfort, validation, and empathy when children express frustration or conflict.
6. Avoid the instinct to resolve conflict without involving the children. Approach conflict as an opportunity to teach children conflict-resolution skills.
7. Model language for children that helps them to express their feelings of frustration – "I can see that you are frustrated because he knocked over your blocks. You can let him know that you are frustrated with that."
8. Guide children in social interactions, including conflicts. Remind children how the program works. For example, "At school we do not throw books."
9. Help children cope with frustration by breaking down tasks into its parts and practicing with children what to do.
10. Avoid discussing anger in the heat of the moment, wait until children are more ready to listen and learn with books, stories, and songs about children who successfully manage frustration.

Putting it to practice

Consider a child who struggles to manage frustration. What activities could you encourage him to do to help him calm his body?

FOSTERING SELF-REGULATION THROUGH CO-REGULATION

When babies are born, they have little ability to self-regulate. They rely on their caregivers to help them regulate their emotions. This is called co-regulation. Co-regulation is a supportive and interactive process in which the attuned caregiver responds to the child's needs and helps the child manage their own emotions during a stressful moment. In co-regulation, the caregiver provides external support and guidance to help the child regulate their emotions and behavior. This support may involve offering comfort and reassurance, as well as modeling coping strategies and emotional regulation techniques. Through co-regulation, children learn to understand and manage their own emotions and develop self-regulation skills.

It is essential that adults recognize their own feelings and regulate their own emotions in difficult moments in order to effectively co-regulate with young children. Young children will not be able to calm their own emotions if their caregiver cannot maintain their own sense of calm.

Benefits:

1. Children learn to identify and regulate their emotions.
2. Secure attachment is formed between children and their caregivers.
3. Consistent co-regulation promotes healthy brain development.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR FOSTERING SELF-REGULATION THROUGH CO-REGULATION

1. Model calmness when helping children manage their emotions. Children learn to manage big feelings by observing how their caregivers manage big feelings.
2. Label the child's emotions, both the feeling and how it shows up in their body, "I see you are crying. You seem sad".
3. Use soothing gestures, such as gentle touch or a comforting tone of voice, to offer comfort, reassurance, and empathy when the child is upset or distressed.
4. Introduce coping strategies such as deep breathing exercises or accessing be-by-myself spaces to offer children opportunities to regulate their own emotions.
5. There are countless coping strategies for young children, but not some may not work for every child. It is important to find the best coping skill(s) for each individual child.
6. When the child is relatively calm, try talking about what to do now. "What would you like to play with now?" "Do you want to read a book with me?"
7. Remember that co-regulation is a skill that develops over time and at different rates for different children depending on their temperament and attachment relationships.
8. Take time to reflect on your interactions with the child and evaluate what strategies were effective and what could be improved. Adjust your approach based on the child's individual needs and preferences.

Putting it into practice

What are some strategies that you use to maintain your calmness in response to a child who is struggling with big feelings?