

Families First

a newsletter for Nebraska Families

July/August 2026

N F A P A

A TRANSFORMATIVE TOOL FOR HEALING FOSTER YOUTH TRAUMA

Written by: Jeanette Yoffe MA, MFT

Children in foster care carry invisible wounds.

They carry the memory of a parent who didn't show up for visits. The confusion of loving someone who hurt them. The shame of believing deeply and privately that it was somehow their fault. As clinicians, we see these wounds expressed through behaviors that follow children from placement to placement: the rages, the shutting down, the pushing away of every person who tries to get close.

Traditional talk therapy, on its own, often isn't enough. What these children need is a body-up, trauma-informed, attachment-focused approach. One that meets children where their trauma actually lives: in the nervous system, in the body, in the silences between words.

One of the most transformative tools I've used in over 20 years of working with foster youth is the Hold Onto My Feelings intervention. It is deceptively simple and profoundly healing for the child and the caregiver together.

Why Foster Youth Can't Just "Talk It Out"

Children who have experienced complex trauma have brains wired for survival. The right brain, where traumatic memories are stored, is in near-constant high alert. The left brain, the seat of language and narrative, becomes largely inaccessible when a child is dysregulated.

Simply put: what gets repressed must be expressed. When big feelings have nowhere to go, they come out sideways through aggression, defiance, withdrawal, or self-harm. Behavior is always communication of an unmet need. And beneath that behavior, for nearly every child in foster care, is grief.

Grief is the core of the foster care experience. Grief over the loss of a birth family, a home, a school, a sibling, a beloved foster parent, a sense of identity. Even when that family was unsafe, children grieve. The therapeutic task is not to rush past that grief, but to help children hold it, name it, and share it.

Because what is shareable becomes bearable

The Hold Onto My Feelings Intervention

Goal: To provide tools for emotional expression and create a safe, warm-holding environment that builds trust and secure attachment between the foster youth and their caregiver.



What you'll need:

- A phone book or newspaper
- A pillowcase
- Markers
- Snacks and beverages
- An optional notebook for the caregiver

Who's in the room: The child and their caregiver (foster parent, adoptive parent, or relative caregiver). The caregiver's presence is essential. This is an attachment intervention as

(Continued on page 3)

Nebraska Foster & Adoptive Parent Association

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Attention Foster Parents!

**Earn Your In-Service Hours While
 Getting the Chance to Win a Great Prize!**

Answer these 10 questions correctly and you will not only earn .5 credits toward your in-service hours, but your name will also be put in a drawing for a prize. For this issue we are offering a \$10 Walmart gift card.

There are a variety of ways to do this. You can email the information to Annie@nfapa.org, send the questionnaire to the NFAPA office at 3601 N. 25th Street, Suite D, Lincoln, NE 68521 or you can complete the questionnaire online at

https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/NFAPA_July-Aug-2026

We will then enter your name in the drawing! We will also send you a certificate for training credit to turn in when it is time for relicensing. Good Luck!



1. What is co-regulation?
2. True or False. Yelling gets the point across because it shows the person's emotions.
3. What is the core of the foster care experience?
4. Besides fight or flight what are two other stress responses?
5. True or False. Bullying has three defining features: it is intentional, it is repeated, and there is a power imbalance.
6. Fill in the Blank. _____ can be traumatic, but it doesn't have to determine a person's whole life.
7. True or False. Screen times are a good reward for good behavior or consequence for bad behavior.
8. Fill in the Blank. _____ can be traumatic, but it doesn't have to determine a person's whole life.
9. Fill in the Blanks. It's also important for parents to know and understand their children's _____ since this can help them become more _____.
10. List 3 examples of co-regulation?
11. What is one way to encourage children to run around outside, play a sport, read a book or do a craft?

Name: _____

Address: _____

Email: _____

Phone #: _____

Families First Newsletter Issue: July / August 2026

(Continued from page 1)

much as it is an expressive one.

Step 1: Prepare and Entice

Tell the child: “I understand you have a lot of big feelings. Today, we’re going to release some of them by ripping up this entire phone book.”

Then add the hook: “And guess who gets to clean it up? Your mom.”

This immediately shifts the power dynamic. The child is in control. You’ve got their attention.

Step 2: The Rip and Release

Teach the child to use I-statements as they rip: “I feel _____ when _____ and I need _____.”

With each statement spoken aloud, they rip out a chunk of the phone book and release it. You are the director, staying curious, drawing them out. If you know something they’re carrying (a parent who kept canceling visits, a placement that ended abruptly), you can gently name it: “I wonder if there’s a part of you that has big feelings about your dad not showing up.”

The release that follows can be cathartic and powerful. Let it be.

When the phone book is fully ripped, celebrate their work. Offer snacks. Let them rest.

Step 3: The Caregiver Steps In

Now invite the caregiver to sit in the middle of all those ripped-up feelings on the floor. Ask them: “What does it feel like to be surrounded by your child’s feelings?”

Many caregivers have a breakthrough moment here. They suddenly understand, viscerally, not just intellectually, the sheer volume of what this child is carrying every single day.

Instruct the caregiver to pick up a handful of feelings, look at their child, and say: “I hear you. I see you. I’m going to help you hold these.” Then, piece by piece, they gather the feelings and place them in the pillowcase.

Ask the child to supervise: “Did they get all of them? Are there any hiding?” This gives the child agency and keeps them engaged in the process.

Step 4: The Pillowcase Goes Home

Here is where the magic continues beyond the therapy room.

The feelings in the pillowcase are not garbage. They go home with the caregiver. During the week, instruct the parent to take a few feelings out of the pillowcase, tuck them into their back pocket or bra strap, and simply go about their day. When the child notices, the parent shares a wordless moment (a look, a nod) that says: I’m still holding your feelings. You don’t have to carry them alone.

One foster mother came back the following week and said: “I went to put the feelings down, and I realized — I can put them down. My child can’t.”

That is the intervention working exactly as intended.



Why This Works: The Clinical Foundation

This intervention draws on several evidence-based principles simultaneously:

Externalizing the internal. Children with trauma histories struggle to access and articulate their emotional world. Physical, expressive action (ripping, releasing, placing) bypasses the cognitive and gives the body a way to speak.

Naming to tame. As Dan Siegel’s research affirms, naming an emotion activates the prefrontal cortex and begins to regulate the nervous system. When children put words to feelings, even while ripping paper, they are building the neural pathways for self-regulation.

Attachment repair in real time. By placing the caregiver inside the child’s emotional experience, we create a corrective attachment moment. The caregiver is no longer observing the child’s pain from the outside: they are in it together. This is the foundation of secure attachment.

Giving grief a container. One of the most destabilizing aspects of foster care is the ambiguity, the not-knowing, the unresolved losses. The pillowcase becomes a tangible container for feelings that have no other home. It tells the child: your grief is real, it matters, and it will be held.

Working with children in foster care asks more of us than almost any other clinical work. It asks us to tolerate uncertainty, to sit with grief, to advocate loudly, and to stay curious when behaviors push us away.

These children don’t need us to rescue them. They need us to bear witness to their pain, their resilience, and their remarkable capacity to heal when someone finally decides not to give up on them.

The Hold Onto My Feelings intervention is one of more

than 175 tools I've developed specifically for this population. But at its heart, every one of them asks the same thing of us as clinicians: show up, stay present, and trust that the relationship itself is the medicine.

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CHILDHOOD TRAUMA DOESN'T DETERMINE YOUR FUTURE, NEW 12-YEAR STUDY SHOWS

Written By: Tom Melville

Childhood trauma does not inevitably lead to poor outcomes in adulthood, new research from UNSW Sydney has found – and many people who experience adversity still thrive for decades afterwards.

Abuse, bullying and household dysfunction in childhood are known to increase the risk of mental illness, but less is known about their long-term impact on mental wellbeing – the positive aspect of mental health.

Now, researchers from UNSW Sydney have mapped how adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) shape mental wellbeing across adult life, finding two thirds of people maintained moderate to high mental wellbeing into adulthood despite childhood trauma.

This is compared to more than 85% of study participants who didn't face childhood trauma and stayed in the higher wellbeing group, suggesting while ACEs have a negative impact, they don't lock a child onto a difficult life-long path.

"Childhood adversity can be traumatic, but it doesn't have to determine a person's whole life," says study Chief Investigator Adjunct Professor Justine Gatt.

The 12-year study, published in *American Psychologist*, uses data from the TWIN-10 longitudinal study, which followed more than 1600 healthy, adult Australian twins at four time points over 12 years, between 2009 and 2024.

Using the COMPAS-W Wellbeing Scale, a 26-item questionnaire designed to evaluate a person's overall mental wellbeing, the researchers measured respondents' composure, own-worth, mastery, positivity, achievement or goal striving, and life satisfaction.

At the 10- and 12-year follow-ups, participants were asked about their mental and physical health, behaviours, and general social functioning.

The team measured 17 types of adverse childhood events, including adoption, extreme poverty and neglect, sustained family conflict, life-threatening illness, and domestic violence.

They also looked at household income, social status, and employment status.

Nearly 900 individuals surveyed faced adverse childhood experiences, and for that group the researchers identified two wellbeing pathways: a "resilient" group who maintained moderate to high wellbeing over time, and a "risk" group whose wellbeing remained low.

Those in the "ACE-resilient" group experienced profound long-term benefits, including being 74% less likely than their low-resilience peers to develop a psychiatric illness, and a greatly lessened risk of becoming obese, suffering from migraines, sleep problems, and alcohol abuse issues.

They also reported better relationships, greater social support, higher life satisfaction and more positive coping strategies.

"What surprised me most was how people can maintain and rebuild their wellbeing over time, even after early adversity," Prof. Gatt says.

"It shows why investing in wellbeing is just as important as treating distress."

The findings suggest we should shift how we support people who've experienced childhood trauma.

Instead of focusing only on what's gone wrong, the research points to the value of building up what helps people stay well in the first place.

That means measuring and promoting mental wellbeing – not just psychological distress symptoms – in schools, GP clinics and community services, and treating mental health as something that can be strengthened over time.

The researchers want to see programs that build resilience expanded and argue that a focus on prevention and wellbeing is likely to reduce downstream healthcare costs.

"Mental health should be proactively treated as a positive capacity that can be built, not just a crisis to be managed when things fall apart," Prof. Gatt says.

Prof. Gatt now wants to better understand why those in the resilient group were better able to function after their childhood trauma.

"We need to define the genetic, environmental, psychological and neural characteristics of the resilient group and what differentiates them from those in the risk group," she says.

The team's earlier research found that people with higher wellbeing tended to have healthier ways of dealing with stress, better emotion regulation strategies, and more naturally extraverted and conscientious personalities – traits linked to better social connection.

They were also more likely to live healthier lives overall, with regular exercise, better diets, and time set aside for activities they enjoy, all of which appear to support resilience across the lifespan.

Further research is needed to determine whether these habits and lifestyle choices offer a blueprint for greater resilience among those at increased risk of mental illness.

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https://www.unsw.edu.au/newsroom/news/2026/03/childhood-trauma-doesnt-determine-your-future?utm_id=97757_v0_s01_e233_tv2_tp1_a1demo0edjewqn

CALM VOICES, CALMER KIDS

Writer: Beth Arky

Clinical Expert: Steven Dickstein, MD

Sometimes it's hard to keep your cool, but less yelling means better communication

Before hopping aboard the roller coaster ride called parenthood, people sans kids have likely witnessed exasperated moms and dads losing it in Aisle 5 and thought smugly, "I'm never going to yell at my kids."

And then they have families of their own and reality sets in. For as their munchkins reach each much-anticipated developmental milestone, they acquire some less desirable skills as well. So a 2-year-old who "scribbles spontaneously" may very well exhibit their newfound talent all over freshly painted walls and prized furniture, while emerging language allows them to repeat certain choice words again and again, including the ever-popular "No!"

Parents know that in the midst of the mayhem, staying calm (aka not yelling) is a golden rule. But unless you're made of stone, it's pretty tough to maintain a measured tone when you're dealing with kids day in and day out. When parents yell, "they've lost it," says Steven G. Dickstein, MD, a child and adolescent psychiatrist. "They're overwhelmed with anger or frustration."

There are very few situations that merit yelling, other than when a child is doing something dangerous or harmful. Yet "I don't think there's a parent who hasn't yelled," says Alice Long, who blogs at Mother L about son D, 3, and daughter Em, 2. "This will happen. Let it go."

So why is it so important to be firm — without raising your voice?

What's wrong with yelling?

- **Upping the ante, losing the message:** Yelling often fails to get the point across because emotions can overcome the message. It will also likely escalate the situation, and the child's aggression, be it verbal or physical.
- **Heard it all before:** If parents yell all the time, Dr. Dickstein notes, "kids may either shut down or ignore it because it's nothing new." Adds Kara Gebhart Uhl, a mother of three and the blogger behind Pleiades Bee,

"Sometimes, a whispered 'I'm very disappointed with your actions' is much more startling to a child than a screaming rant."

- **Hard on self-esteem:** We know that yelling and harsh parenting are associated with lower self-esteem for kids, and can affect their performance in school. Kids who are the object of verbal aggression are at risk for aggressive or disruptive behavior. Dr. Dickstein cautions that when mom or dad yells, kids may feel the parent doesn't "love them or even like them" and can only criticize.
- **Missing out on the positive:** When yelling is the chronic mode of communication, both children and parents are missing out on the chance to form positive, affectionate bonds. And for kids predisposed to anxiety and depression, internalizing these negative interactions may be the tipping point.
- **You feel bad, too:** Meanwhile, blowouts can leave parents feeling guilty, frustrated and demoralized. Adults who express anger in negative ways increase their chronic stress, which contributes to health problems.

Why calmer is better

Addressing inappropriate behavior calmly enables you to focus on teaching the child what's problematic about their behavior, and following through with effective consequences.

- **Modeling behavior is major:** When parents practice healthy self-regulation, it helps kids learn how to self-regulate themselves. Mom Regina Myers testifies that when she turns the volume way down, her "teenager responds much better and yells less himself!"
- **Kids feel safer.** The best style of parenting features "a high degree of nurturing, firm but kind," says clinical psychologist Melanie Fernandez. As much as children and teens may act like they want control, what really makes them feel safe are calm, consistent, fair authority figures. (There's a reason why some parents look to Dog Whisperer Cesar Millan for child-rearing tips. After all, good parents must be leaders of their pack, um, family.)

If you work on specific strategies that help yourself feel calmer, you can help your children learn to regulate better.

Tips for parents

- **Identify problem interactions:** Pinpoint the recurring problems that frequently set you and your kids off. If getting out the door for school in the morning is a chronic issue, solutions might include laying out their clothes and showering the night before, or everyone waking up a bit earlier. Try to break it down into steps you can tackle calmly.
- **Create consistency:** With younger kids, it helps to create a set routine with simple, one-step directions that could include visual aids, not to mention plenty of labeled praise and rewards.
- **Consider triggers:** Being aware of the context of the behavior allows for calmer responses. If we recognize

when a child is cranky because they missed their snack or are overtired, it can be easier to temper our own frayed feelings.

- **Understanding = patience:** It's also important for parents to know and understand their children's capabilities, since this can help them become more patient. Understanding her son's difficulties — he has sensory processing issues — was “a game changer” for Long. You can become calmer, she says, when you “accept kids as they are, love them as they are, and recognize that half the problem is how you react.”
- **Time management:** Trying to do too much causes stress. “The times I lose it are the times when I'm already overtaxing myself,” Long says. “The time to do bills is not when the kids are at the table doing an art project.” She notes that parents trying to multitask increases the risk of kids misbehaving. “Just be there with your kids; it's less likely they'll throw their breakfast on the floor.”
- **Count to 10:** All the parents interviewed for this article had one key piece of advice: Take a break and breathe. It's important to recognize when you're about to lose control so you can step away from the situation, even leaving the room when you can do it safely. (A mom who tells her child she's taking a time-out is modeling self-calming behavior.) “I'm not a yeller,” Uhl says. “But when I feel myself becoming hot with frustration, and I hear myself getting louder and louder, I stop, check myself, take a deep breath, and start over.”
- **Disengage:** Actively ignoring problem behaviors is another strategy that helps stop parents from yelling. If you disengage from the situation until you regain your composure, you won't be feeding the fire. (This cannot be done when a child is being aggressive or destructive.) Instead, by responding positively to only desired behavior, parents reinforce what they want vs. what they don't want. Plus, by allowing kids to practice “slowing their engines down” on their own, without parental prompts, they're learning how to handle frustration.
- **Learn to let go and when to laugh it off:** Along with ignoring comes learning to loosen up. “If the snack ends up on the floor,” Long says, “instead of getting mad at the kids, I'll say, ‘Oh no, you made a mess, let's clean it up together.’ Do what you have to do to make it easier on yourself.”
- **Seek support:** Long adds that it also helps to have a safety net of friends and relatives for those extremely bad days when you don't feel you can calm yourself down and need to call in reinforcements. Blogs, support groups, other parents and clinicians can all help by assuring parents they aren't alone.
- **Own up to your feelings:** Depending on the age and developmental level of the child, parents may, after things have calmed down, model for their kids how to

talk about feelings. “You can tell them you're not feeling respected or you're feeling ignored,” Dr. Dickstein says. Dan Janzen, who has had “a hotheaded moment or two” with his son, 9, and daughter, 6, says he tries to give them “a way to understand the yelling — it's not because they're bad kids; it's because I lost my temper. ‘I'm sorry I lost my temper — that was kind of rough, and I shouldn't yell at you. But do you understand why I got little frustrated?’ And then we have a brief conversation about the situation.”

“I also make a point of always following up quickly with something along the lines of, ‘Even when I lose my temper, I still love you,’” Janzen adds. “I think the running theme is to try to keep the eruptions from undermining their trust or security. No matter what happens, I'm still the same slightly ridiculous but well-intentioned daddy who loves them.”

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https://childmind.org/article/calm-voices-calmer-kids/?fbclid=IwRlRTSARY0qNleHRuA2FibQlxlM QBzcnRjBmFwcF9pZAo2NjI4NTY4Mzc5AAEetBakq_1y64a4_2CpWxgmX5FrUjZmfgH4u96TNA nXzyppUZkTaI9HaoBkcV8_aem_gJ08m1WiY_Rfy5VrjhlvLw

WHAT IS CO-REGULATION?

WRITER: MOLLY HAGAN

CLINICAL EXPERT: LAKISHA HOFFMAN, MSW

Helping kids regulate their emotions requires managing your own

Emotions can be volatile. They can prompt us to do or say things that are harmful, hurtful, or just plain regrettable — so we do our best to manage, or regulate, them. Self-regulation looks like taking a deep breath and saying, “Please put your Legos away after you finish playing, so I don't step on one” instead of scooping up every Lego in your house and chucking them out the window.

As adults, we practice self-regulation all the time in interactions with our co-workers, friends, and partners. It's not always easy, but we know that it's more effective and productive to talk about what's upsetting us rather than to just react.

But self-regulation is not innate; it's a set of skills everyone must learn. Developmentally, kids are like cars with faulty brakes, born with the capacity to experience every shade of emotion but none of the tools to regulate them.

What is co-regulation?

Co-regulation is a mutual act, an exchange of calm that occurs between two people. But when it comes to adults (who have acquired the cognitive tools to manage their emotions)

NFAPA Support Groups

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Raising children in foster, kinship, or adoptive care is a rewarding journey, but you don't have to walk it alone. The **Nebraska Foster and Adoptive Parent Association (NFAPA)** invites you to join our upcoming support groups. Whether you prefer meeting in person or connecting from the comfort of your home, we have a space for you to find community, resources, and encouragement.

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-

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Join us online for our August statewide connection. 1-hour of in-service training.

- **When:** Second Thursday in August | 6:30 PM – 8:00 PM
 - **RSVP:** Contact Vicki at Vicki@nfapa.org for the meeting ID.
-

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- **Expert Guidance:** Gain access to resources and advice tailored to foster and kinship care.
- **Stronger Communities:** Build a network of support that lasts a lifetime.

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and children, co-regulation also means helping a child learn how to regulate their own emotions by showing empathy and modeling calmness. Co-regulation does not mean pretending to exist in a state of calm all the time or never getting angry. It means actively managing your own emotions to help kids learn to manage theirs.

Co-regulation is both something you actively do as well as a biological process — it happens in your body. Research shows that we can directly influence certain processes in one another, such as the production of a stress hormone called cortisol. The distress of others — say, a wailing child — can cause us to feel similar distress. And when we remain calm, we can influence the production of hormones in others to help them calm down too.

Co-regulation has recently become a buzzword in parenting circles, but LaKisha Hoffman, MSW, first encountered the concept as an assistant school principal in Richmond, California. “Students would come to me and be like, ‘Oh, my teacher did this.’ Then the teacher would also come to me and be like, ‘Oh, the student did this and this,’” she recalls.

Teachers seemed to find that kids’ behaviors set off their own emotions in ways that were difficult to control. “Some teachers were triggered by students getting up and walking around,” Hoffman says. “Some were triggered by students who were talking out of turn. Some were triggered by students who were challenging them.”

Hoffman could empathize with teachers’ frustrations. But she also recognized that, as adults, teachers had a greater responsibility to be aware of their own triggers so they could support and engage with students even when they acted out.

Co-regulation begins with self-regulation

For adults — parents, caretakers, or teachers — co-regulation begins with self-regulation. Everyone is shaped by their own personal experiences. “We’re all human,” Hoffman says. “Different things set us off as adults. How do we recognize those things? How do we cope, soothe ourselves in those moments? That’s the first step.”

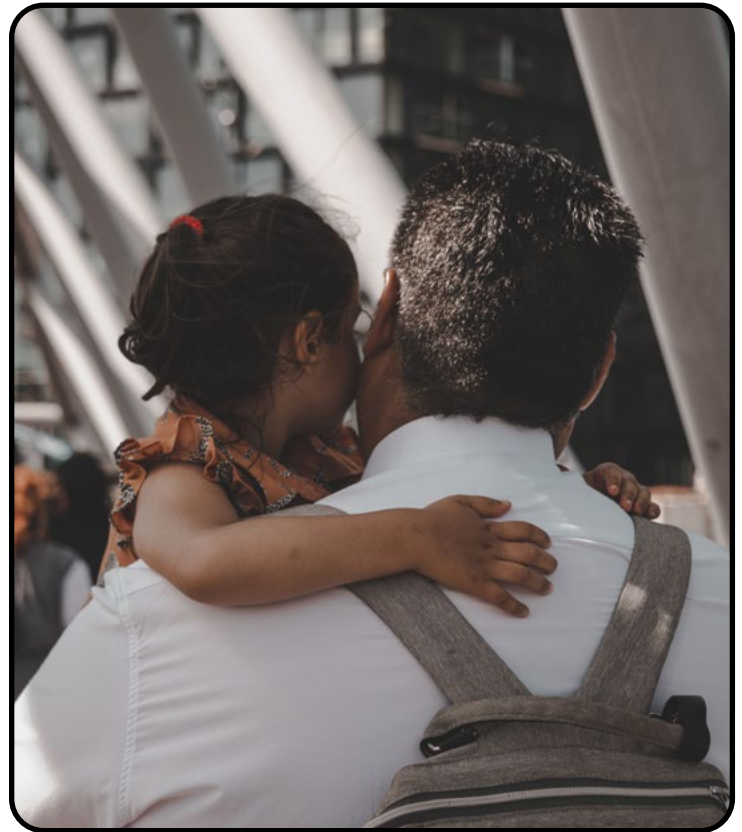
Hoffman, a former college basketball player, coaches several youth teams. She recognizes that one of her triggers is when a child bounces a ball while she’s talking. It’s a small thing, but Hoffman knows from experience that it bothers her. “But I can’t just be like, ‘STOP bouncing the basketball,’” she says. “I can’t interact with them like that. I have to be calm in that moment and say, ‘Hey, what’s happening now? Are you supposed to be bouncing the ball?’ I have to build a culture for them to understand why they shouldn’t do that.”

Know your stress responses

Humans have evolved stress responses to help us respond to danger, but those responses can be triggered by stress even when it isn’t life-threatening. Perhaps you’ve heard the term fight-or-flight? Other stress responses include freeze and the lesser-known fawn (appeasing someone to avoid conflict). Say your child throws a tantrum in the grocery store because you

took their iPad away. So, you give it back to avoid a scene. This is a fawn response. Fawn responses are also common among people who have experienced trauma, such as abuse.

Is your instinct to yell when your child upsets you (fight)? Instead, do you tend to walk away (flight) or are their reactions sometimes so overwhelming that you get mentally “stuck” and shut down (freeze)? Stress responses can become ingrained. But when you can recognize why you react to something that upsets you a certain way, you can find better ways to cope.



Reach for a strategy

The phrase “take a deep breath” is a cliché for fighting stress. But decades of research show that deep breathing has profound effects on the regions of the brain that govern emotion and cognition. We tend to breathe too fast (hyperventilate) when we panic, so techniques to slow breathing can help us calm down. Even a few deep breaths can kick-start the process. Some specific techniques include belly breathing, box breathing, and butterfly breathing — a particularly good exercise to do with kids.

Of course, you can always just gulp in more air, but the purpose of deep breathing is really self-awareness. When we step outside of ourselves and acknowledge that yes, we are in fact quite angry, we are taking the first step toward controlling the anger — or whatever emotion we’re feeling.

Recognizing dysregulation in kids

When adults can identify their own triggers and stress responses, they are better equipped to recognize them in kids.

Emotional dysregulation can look different depending on the person and situation. For a lot of kids, particularly young

kids, dysregulation might look like screaming, stomping feet, or pounding fists on the floor. But consider fight, flight, freeze, or fawn. Dysregulation can also look like withdrawing, overcompliance with adults, or an inability to say “no.”

And dysregulation can escalate. “If I get worked up and kids are looking at me, then they all get worked up,” says Hoffman. “Then we’ve just got a whole bunch of worked up people. How do we problem solve in that moment?”

The goal of co-regulation is to reverse course, to de-escalate intensifying stress.

Co-regulation strategies

Not all co-regulation is conscious. Our bodies and brains can respond to others without us even realizing it. That said, there are actions we can take to cue the process. Much like the way deep breathing sends a message to your brain to calm down, there are things you can do to send a similar message to another person’s body.

Whether you’re a teacher or a caregiver, it’s important to teach kids strategies for calming down, like deep breathing exercises, before you need to reach for them in a crisis. When our emotions are out of whack, we can’t easily focus on or process new information because our brains are too busy dealing with the stress.

Let’s say a child is having a meltdown. They’re collapsed in a puddle on the floor, hiccup-sobbing and struggling to catch their breath. The first thing you need to do is take stock of your own physical reaction — Is your heart beating faster? Do you feel your face getting hot? — and take a few deep breaths. Relax your body, then:

- **Get on their level.** When a child feels overwhelmed, it’s tough to help them calm down when you’re towering over them. If you can, get close to eye level and look them in the eyes. Research shows that eye contact fosters trust and connectedness. Eye contact can help kids feel safe. But it’s also important to note that some kids with autism can be hypersensitive to direct eye contact, so it’s best to take your cues from the individual child.
- **Name their emotion.** For example: “It looks like you’re really upset, right now.” Labeling a child’s emotion lets kids know explicitly that you can see what they might be feeling. You’re validating the emotion here, not the behavior — it’s okay to feel bad. Labeling also teaches them to notice and name their own emotions, which for very young kids is not intuitive.
- **Change your tone.** Be sure to keep your tone calm, and don’t raise your voice. Trying your best to sound relaxed can be a powerful disruptor when a child is upset because we tend to imitate the behaviors we see in others. This “mirroring” happens subconsciously, as a product of mirror neurons in the brain. And there is growing evidence that suggests mirror neurons play an important role in how we learn and express empathy.
- **Give them a hug or a squeeze.** When children are

extremely dysregulated, they might be sensitive or even averse to touch. But if a child is consenting to touch, it is a potent tool in the co-regulation toolkit. Touching another person can boost their oxytocin levels. Oxytocin, sometimes called the “love hormone,” makes us feel good. It also perpetuates its own release, meaning that a hug or a hand squeeze can have a positive effect that outlasts the action itself.

- **Guide them in a calming exercise.** If there is a calming or breathing exercise that the child is familiar with — maybe you learned it together, maybe they learned it in school — suggest you do it together. Don’t be deterred if they say no. Say you’d like to do the exercise because it helps you calm down (it’s helpful, especially with very young kids, to reinforce what these exercises are actually for) and start doing it yourself. They may just watch you; they may join in. In the end, either outcome is valuable.

We are imperfect beings. We won’t always offer the best or most mindful response when we’re upset but making the effort to be aware of our own emotions and behaviors sets a powerful example for kids. Whatever your specific process, the most important takeaway of co-regulation is that kids absorb what they see you do — and it may be easier for them to calm down if you show them how to do it. As Hoffman says, “The best way to teach is to model.”

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ADHD AND BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS

Why are tantrums, outbursts and defiance so common in kids with the disorder? And how can we help them behave better?

Writer: Caroline Miller

Clinical Expert: Dave Anderson, PhD

We think of kids with ADHD as having trouble paying attention. But for many of them — and their parents — behavior is a big problem, too. Sometimes a bigger problem. They may be quick to lash out, throw a tantrum or be defiant when they are asked to do things they don’t want to do.

Tantrums and defiance are not symptoms of ADHD itself, but they are often a result of ADHD symptoms. Inattention and impulsivity can make it very difficult for kids to tolerate tasks that are repetitive, or take a lot of work, or kids find boring. Children with ADHD can be overwhelmed with frustration, and throwing a shoe or pushing someone or yelling “shut up!” can be the result of impulsivity. They are

less able than other kids their age to manage powerful feelings without an outburst.

But behavior problems can also go beyond impulsive outbursts. Some kids with ADHD develop negative behavior patterns, and those, argues David Anderson, PhD, a clinical psychologist at the Child Mind Institute, are a response to years of finding themselves in conflict with adults

In cases where kids with ADHD are chronically defiant, they are also diagnosed with a behavior disorder called oppositional defiant disorder (ODD). As many as 40 percent of kids with ADHD are also diagnosed with ODD. *But many more of them are in conflict with parents or teachers over their behavior* — as many as 80 percent, observes Dr. Anderson, a clinical psychologist.

Why do kids with ADHD act out?

To understand why kids with ADHD are often angry, aggressive or defiant, Dr. Anderson says, you have to think about their history growing up with ADHD.

Kids with ADHD are wired to be attracted by things that are outside the bounds of what we want them to be doing, he explains, which leads to conflict with parents from a very young age. “There’s no malicious intent on the part of these young kids,” he adds. “Because of the hyperactive and impulsive symptoms of ADHD, they don’t want to stay in their seat. They want to explore the entire restaurant. They want to run away from you at the park to check something out that looks cool. That can result in pretty stressed out parents pretty quickly.”

This leads to a lot of negative interaction. “If you’re being told from an early age that your behavior is wrong, or isn’t what a kid is supposed to be doing, either you internalize it and you start thinking, ‘There really is something wrong with me,’ or you react aggressively towards the people who are telling you that you’re wrong.”

Why do kids with ADHD throw tantrums?

For kids with ADHD, tasks that are repetitive or boring or require a lot of effort can be acutely challenging, and elicit a lot of resistance, especially if it means stopping something that’s pleasurable — like playing a video game. So things like homework, going to bed, getting dressed and coming to dinner can become battlegrounds. Unfortunately for parents, the avoidance strategies that these kids typically use are tantrums, arguing, defiance and power struggles.

“If they throw a fit, it’s very likely that someone will change the task demands, make it easier on them, or settle for the bare minimum compliance,” adds Dr. Anderson. That works for the kid, so the behavior tends to be repeated.

Discipline strategies may not work

When kids have developed a pattern of negative interaction, discipline that works with other kids may be ineffective. “People do certain things naturally in parenting,” says Dr. Anderson. “For most kids, it works just fine. For kids with a

behavioral issue, these things fail miserably.”

One thing that doesn’t work is losing your temper. For a child who rarely misbehaves, a parent who raises their voice may have an impact. “But kids who misbehave often habituate to this quickly. If you yell a lot, they eventually decide that’s the way of the world. People are just going to yell at them so why pay that much attention?”

Similarly, Dr. Anderson explains, punishment loses its effectiveness. “If kids get punished a lot, punishments stop mattering because, after all, they’re living in a perpetual state of punishment. How much is it really going to matter if they get punished a little bit more?”

Discipline strategies that do work

Kids with ADHD often need more structure than other kids, and clearer instruction as to what kinds of behavior an adult is looking for. “As parents we need to help kids figure out what acceptable behaviors are, teach those acceptable behaviors and catch kids being good as often as we possibly can,” says Dr. Anderson. Praise and opportunities for a positive relationship with parents are powerful tools for managing disruptive behavior, which tends to escalate when a relationship is mostly negative interactions.

Clinicians call this kind of proactive structure “scaffolding.” Kids who are having trouble regulating their own behavior within acceptable limits need a family environment that provides external regulation of behavior. The structure that parents provide is a model for what we want kids to learn, and keeps them in good standing as they develop better self-regulation.

Trouble regulating emotions

Self-regulation is the ability to manage your emotions and behavior in accordance with the demands of the situation. It includes being able to resist highly emotional reactions to upsetting stimuli, to calm yourself down when you get upset, to adjust to a change in expectations and to handle frustration without an outburst.

Poor self-regulation is so common in kids with ADHD that some experts, including veteran ADHD researcher Russell Barkley, think it should be one of the core symptoms of the disorder.

But Dr. Anderson notes that it makes sense as an outgrowth of the impulsivity that’s part of ADHD; these kids have difficulty with inhibition, with planning and with delay of gratification.

“You take all of that together, you’ve got a kid who’s more likely to look for the short-term payoff than long-term payoffs,” he says. “You’ve got a kid who doesn’t want to wait, who finds it excruciating to wait, who’s quickly distractable, and for one reason or another is impaired on repetitive tasks, tasks that take a lot of work or tasks that kids find boring.”

Trouble with friends

Unfortunately, the behavior problems kids with ADHD

exhibit often affect their relationships not just with adults but with other kids.

“There are a host of reasons why we see friendships being impaired by ADHD symptoms,” notes Dr. Anderson. “For a kid who’s highly distractable, it could be they can’t keep up with a pace of conversation and their friends just notice they’re zoned out. For the kid who’s really impulsive, it might be they interrupt other kids and don’t let anybody else get a word in edgewise. For kids who have real difficulty delaying gratification, it may be that they always have to choose the activity, and anybody who doesn’t want to go along with it gets some impulsive speech directed at them.”

In one study of kids at summer camp, after only a few hours of interaction, the boys with ADHD were far more likely to be disliked and rejected by their peers than the boys without a diagnosis.

The main reasons given for the quick negative perceptions was their explosive, retaliatory, and impulsive behavior patterns, researchers found. Stephen Hinshaw, PhD, one of the authors of the study and now the professor of psychology at the University of California, Berkeley, notes that girls with ADHD are subject to even more peer rejection than boys, “probably because their behavior patterns are more gender atypical.”

Help for behavior problems

When children with ADHD develop serious behavior problems, whether they had a diagnosis of ODD or not, the most effective treatment is parent training. There are many parent training programs, but what they have in common is that they teach parents how to reset the relationship with the child.

Parents learn how to use praise effectively, to encourage the behaviors they want to encourage, and how to deploy consistent consequences when kids don’t comply. The result is that kids learn to modulate their behavior to meet expectations and enjoy much more positive interactions with their parents. Social skills training and individual cognitive behavioral therapy can also help kids interact in a healthier way with both adults and their peers.

For kids with ADHD, stimulant medication that reduces symptoms of inattention, impulsivity and hyperactivity may also help improve behavior. Anti-psychotic medications like Abilify (aripiprazole) and Risperdal (risperdone), which have been shown to reduce aggression and irritability, are frequently used in cases where a child is at risk of being removed from the school or home.

But even when medication is used, experts recommend that it be paired with parent training for the best results.

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WHAT TO DO WHEN YOUR CHILD WON'T TALK ABOUT BEING BULLIED

Writer: Juliann Garey

Clinical Experts: Megan Ice, PhD , Stephanie Ruggiero, PsyD

How to spot the signs, support your child, and take action when schools don't step in

Bullying is something we hope won't happen to our kids — or if it does, that they'll come to us right away. But sometimes kids don't tell us. They may be embarrassed, afraid it will get worse if they “snitch,” or worried we'll overreact and make things worse. Maybe your once-outgoing child suddenly wants to stay home from school or your teen seems anxious every time a notification buzzes on their phone. You know something's going on, but they insist everything is fine.

Before acting, it helps to know what counts as bullying. Not every unkind moment between kids rises to that level. Stephanie Ruggiero, PsyD, a clinical psychologist at the Child Mind Institute, says bullying has three defining features: It's intentional, it's repeated, and there's a power imbalance — meaning the child doing the bullying has more social, physical, or emotional power. (You can read more on what's bullying and what's not.)

Spotting signs of bullying when kids don't talk

Parents are often the first to notice that something is wrong, even when their child insists everything is fine. Dr. Ruggiero says to watch for:

- **Physical complaints:** Stomachaches, headaches, or other ailments that pop up before school
- **Avoidance:** Refusing to go to school, skipping activities, or faking illness
- **Changes in mood:** Becoming irritable, withdrawn, or unusually anxious
- **Sleep issues:** Nightmares, bedwetting, or trouble falling asleep
- **Missing or damaged belongings:** Unexplained broken glasses, lost electronics, or ripped clothing

When bullying happens online, look for:

- Hiding phones or slamming laptops shut when you walk in the room
- Sudden deletion of social media accounts or creation of new ones
- Blocking numbers or removing friends
- Extreme emotional reactions — anger, tears, panic — after a notification
- Dramatic increases or decreases in screen time

“Those changes in behavior are your clues,” Dr. Ruggiero says. “If you notice patterns that aren't typical for your child, trust your gut.” Imagine, for example, that your eighth grader suddenly starts asking to stay home from school and spends

hours scrolling on their phone, only to come away in tears. These patterns can be unsettling, and they're often the first clue something is happening beneath the surface.

Reasons your child might not want to talk

Megan Ice, PhD, a psychologist in the Mood Disorders Center at the Child Mind Institute, says that understanding why kids stay silent is often the key to helping them open up. "Before doing anything," she says, "I try to clarify what's actually happening — and help parents manage their own anxiety so they can just listen and validate, not jump into problem-solving right away. Sometimes that's enough to give the child space to talk."

Kids' reasons for staying quiet vary widely:

- **Fear the situation will get worse:** Many kids have seen or experienced school interventions that backfired — for example, being labeled a "snitch," or having their class schedule or lunch period changed in ways that make them feel singled out.
- **Shame or embarrassment:** Boys, Dr. Ice notes, often feel pressure to act like they don't care. Kids teased about personal or private issues — like hygiene, bedwetting, or body image — may feel too humiliated to talk.
- **Fear of consequences:** Sometimes kids keep quiet because they've broken a rule. "If a child was bullied after sharing a nude photo or cheating on a test, they might fear punishment as much as the bullying itself," Dr. Ice says.
- **Worry about burdening parents:** Some kids hesitate to bring problems home because they sense their parents are stressed. Others don't want to make their parents feel guilty or upset.

"Identifying what's keeping a child silent helps parents approach them with empathy," Dr. Ice says.

Creating space for conversation

When you suspect something is wrong, your first instinct might be to press for answers — but pushing too hard can backfire. "The goal is to make it safe for your child to share," Dr. Ruggiero says. "That starts with being calm, present, and curious." Here are ways to encourage conversation with your child that may make them open up more easily:

- **Use open-ended questions:** Skip yes-or-no questions. Instead try, "If your teacher called me, what would they say about your day?"
- **Validate feelings:** Say things like, "That sounds really frustrating," or "I can see why that made you sad."
- **Get creative:** For younger kids, watch their play for clues. Pretend games can give hints of what's happening at school. "If their dolls or action figures start acting out mean behavior," Dr. Ice explains, "that can open the door for gentle questions like, 'That sounded unkind — does that ever happen at school?'"
- **Read together:** Books can be a gentle way to help little kids understand and talk about bullying. The Child Mind

Institute has a list of clinician-recommended books on bullying. Dr. Ruggiero also recommends checking out the American Psychological Association's Magination Press, which publishes psychologist-written books for kids on a range of topics. You can search their site by topic and age group to find books that fit your child's needs.

- **Communicate through writing:** Older kids who struggle with verbal expression might be more comfortable writing you a note, sending a text, or even using a simple emoji to show how they feel.
- **Take advantage of side-by-side moments:** Talk in the car, while walking the dog, or during another low-pressure activity. This works especially well with tweens and teens who may be hesitant to let parents in.

Avoid overreacting, panicking, interrupting and/or rushing them, or minimizing their experience. "If parents stay calm, it shows kids they can handle hard news," Dr. Ruggiero says. "That makes kids much more likely to come to you again."

What to do if they still won't talk

If your child continues to shut down despite your efforts, Dr. Ice says the next step depends on what you're seeing. "If there's concrete evidence — like hurtful messages, damaged belongings, or visible injuries — it's worth bringing in support," she says. "Often the school counselor is the best first call, because they know the teachers, the social dynamics, and can quietly monitor what's happening day-to-day."

If your child refuses to meet with a counselor at school — maybe because they're worried about confidentiality or being seen in that office — an outside therapist can help. "Therapy gives kids a private space to process what's happening," Dr. Ice adds, "and can still include coordination with the school."

With younger children, the classroom teacher might be the right starting point, since that teacher sees all of their interactions. In middle and high school, the counselor usually has the best overview of what's happening across classes and social settings.

When to involve your child's school — and when not to

Many parents might be surprised to hear that involving the school may not always be the best solution for their child. "I'm often cautious about contacting schools without the child's explicit permission, especially for middle or high schoolers," Dr. Ice says. "If they don't feel part of the plan, it can make things worse."

Dr. Ice says that sometimes the child is open to limited communication with the school — for instance, agreeing to ask for more supervision at recess or using a different bathroom if that's where the bullying happens.

Dr. Ice adds that a good rule of thumb is to involve the school when there's a clear safety risk, repeated targeting, or when the bullying affects your child's functioning — but to proceed more cautiously when it's a one-time social conflict

or when your child strongly resists.

“It also helps to stay curious,” Dr. Ice explains. “Sometimes parents only hear one side, and it turns out their child is doing something — like humming or joking constantly — that’s irritating peers. The goal isn’t to blame them, but to understand the full picture so you can plan the right response.”

Tips for talking to the school

When you do contact the school, frame the conversation as collaborative: You’re working together to solve a problem, not pointing fingers. Share the facts you’ve gathered, bring any screenshots or documentation, and ask what steps they can take to keep your child safe.

“If the situation doesn’t improve, escalate gradually — from teacher, to counselor, to principal, to superintendent, if necessary,” Dr. Ruggiero says. “And know your school’s anti-bullying policy so you can reference it when you’re asking for help.” Remember that schools are still responsible for addressing bullying that happens off-campus if it affects a child’s ability to learn or feel safe at school.

Helping your child respond to bullying

Parents often struggle to know when to step in and when to let kids handle things themselves. “If your child’s safety is at risk, if the bullying is persistent, or if they ask for help — you step in,” Dr. Ruggiero says. “For more typical social conflicts, you can coach from the sidelines, offering ideas and encouragement while letting them practice handling things on their own.”

When helping a child plan their own response to bullies, Dr. Ice suggests walking through real-life situations together. “If they’re worried about lunchtime, talk about where they’ll sit, who they can join, and what they’ll do if someone whispers or posts something unkind. Having that script in mind — even simple phrases like ‘I don’t want to talk about that’ — makes it easier to cope in real time.”

Shifting a child’s response can sometimes make a difference. “If we can help a child respond more neutrally instead of with tears or anger, it often takes away the payoff for the bully,” she explains. For example, if a child tends to cry or lash out, have them practice staying calm and asking for a bathroom break so they can regroup. “Or, she says, they can simply turn and walk away. It’s not about pretending not to care — it’s about learning to manage those big feelings in a private, safer space so the bully doesn’t get that reaction they’re looking for.”

Dr. Ice sums it up this way: “The best approach depends on your child’s readiness. The more we include them in decisions and problem-solving, the more empowered they feel — and that confidence is often what ultimately reduces the bullying.”

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MEDIA GUIDELINES FOR KIDS OF ALL AGES

Writer: Rachel Ehmke

Clinical Expert: Donna Wick, Ed.D

Tips for making sure your children’s screen time is healthy

Parents and caretakers used to just worry about kids watching too much TV, or playing too many video games. We still worry about those things, but now the screen time list has gotten much longer. Phones, tablets, apps, social media, texting — they all can captivate kids (and adults) starting at a very young age. What’s a parent to do? Going back to bed isn’t an option, but taking a deep breath and encouraging rational moderation is. Here are some tips, broken down by age group, to get you started.

Very young children (0-4)

- **Limit exposure.** The American Academy of Pediatrics says screens can be beneficial for facilitating video chats with loved ones but recommends avoiding television and other entertainment media for children under 18 months. If families do choose to introduce media at this age, it should be educational programming. The AAP cautions that parents should watch with their children to answer any questions they might have as they get older. For children two to five, the AAP recommends limiting media consumption to an hour of high-quality programming, again with the caveat that parents should be watching alongside.
- **Start leading by example early.** Even before your child has a phone or tablet of their own, show them how devices should be used. Don’t check your messages at the dinner table. Look at people when they’re talking to you — not at your phone. Remember that your children are always watching you and young children notice everything — that’s how they learn.
- **Don’t underestimate the value of traditional toys and open spaces.** It’s important for kids to experience unstructured “free play,” which means that they decide what to do, and how to do it, and are playing simply for play’s sake — not to get to the next level in a game, or learn some specific skill. Children should experience the fun of making up their own rules — and breaking them — as they go along. This kind of play lets kids:

Move at their own pace, instead of being driven (or hurried) along by fast-moving media

Develop creativity

Get experience making decisions

Practice sharing and working with others

Learn to be a leader and self-advocate

Apps — however educational they claim to be — are no

substitute for the kind of learning that comes to kids naturally if we let it.

- **Do leave the tablet at home.** While they are helpful during a long car or plane ride, tablets and other devices are out of place in the stroller or car on the way to preschool. It's important for kids to have the opportunity to look around them and find entertainment (not to speak of learning) in the real world, too. And they should not be part of play dates!

Grade school kids (5-11)

- **Watch things together.** If you're worried that your kids are getting bad messages from the media, the best way to counteract them is to watch alongside your kids and point out when something isn't right. Call out a female character if she only seems to care about boys, or how she looks. Provide context if you are seeing unhealthy relationships (including friendships) or unrealistic beauty standards. Besides reinforcing your values, this will teach your kids to watch television and movies actively, not passively, which is good for their self-esteem. Do this during commercials, too!
- **Screen time shouldn't be all the time.** The AAP recommends that parents set sensible boundaries on how much screen time is appropriate for their child. Just as important: designating media-free spaces, like bedrooms and the dinner table. Establishing (and enforcing) these limits from a young age teaches kids to be healthy media consumers.
- **Be discerning.** Determining what is quality screen time and what isn't might not be obvious, but look out for things that:
 - Are age-appropriate
 - Engage your child's imagination
 - Have the right values

Common Sense Media has more pointers here. Conversely, if you don't want your child playing a particular game or watching a particular show, explain your reasons why and be specific — don't just say it's "bad."

- **Don't make screens the reward (or consequence).** Technology is enormously appealing to kids as it is, but when we make screen time the go-to thing kids get for good behavior — or get taken away for bad behavior — we are making it even more desirable, thereby increasing the chances that a child will overvalue it.
- **Encourage other activities.** There are many ways to have fun. Running around outside, playing a sport, reading books, doing crafts — variety is important for a balanced life. Encourage your kids to develop a wide range of interests. Model yourself doing this, too. Let your kids see you reading a book and making things and having a hobby. Finally, present these things as just as rewarding as screen time — not alternatives to it.

Equal billing is important.

- **Be prepared for them to discover porn.** Even if they're not exactly looking for it, kids today can stumble onto pornography very easily. Curiosity is often a big motivator, so don't be shy about having some frank, developmentally appropriate conversations about sex. If they hear it from you then they'll be less likely to turn to the internet for answers, and they'll be more likely to ask you to explain what they see online or hear from friends. And if they do see porn, let them know what they saw was no more realistic than any other movie.

Tweens and teens (12+)

- **Keep modeling good tech behavior.** It's easy to let things slide once kids are older and have their own devices, but remember that the old rules still apply. Don't use your phone at the table and make sure your kids don't need to compete with a screen for your attention. Besides setting a good example, this shows them that you care and are interested, which makes them more likely to open up. Even though they're getting older, your kids still need to talk to you, not just their friends.
- **Encourage privacy.** Whatever age your family decides is appropriate for social media, make sure that your child is very careful about privacy. Research privacy settings with them and make sure they understand when something is public or private — or somewhere in the middle — and how that should affect what they post. As a general rule, they shouldn't share anything online that they wouldn't be comfortable with the entire world reading. Including their grandmother.
- **Yes to friending, no to spying.** If your child is on social media, follow or friend them, and monitor their page. But don't go through text messages unless there is cause for concern. Begin by trusting your children. To not give your kid the benefit of the doubt is damaging to the relationship.
- **Make it clear that naked pictures are a bad idea (and explain why).** Sometimes kids think sharing photos is a way to build trust, but it can do the opposite just as easily. Your daughter might trust her boyfriend with her photos but he, in turn, might trust a close friend, and so on. Or she might trust him to delete the photos, but later finds out that he kept them on his phone, and people found them when they were scrolling through his pictures. These are some innocent ways the pictures could get into the wrong hands — there are a lot of less innocent ways they could, too. And once the pictures are out there, they can damage future relationships and job prospects, not to mention become the talk of the school.

Also, in case your kid doesn't know, if they are a minor, sharing naked pictures can get them and whoever they're sending them to in a lot of trouble for child porn.

- **Texting can be tricky.** Warn kids that it's easy for people to misinterpret messages when they aren't hearing the tone of your voice or seeing the expression on your face. Jokes, in particular, might seem mean. To guard against misunderstandings and hurt feelings, it's always a good idea to make it clear when you're joking.

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SELF-CARE: IT'S NOT ABOUT DURATION—IT'S ABOUT FREQUENCY

Written by: Erica Layne

It was 7pm and my 6-year-old was in the middle of her 20 millionth meltdown of the day. (Or at least, it darn well FELT like that many!)

I suggested she take a bath and get ready for bed—to which she responded like I had suggested we pull out some teeth just for the heck of it!

I looked at her tear-stained face and her giant, red-brimmed hazel eyes and had this sudden moment of clarity...

"Hey Quinn!" I said, with considerably more energy in my voice than I'd had a minute before. "You know what you need? A 'taking care of Quinn' night."

"A what?" she asked, perking up almost imperceptibly.

"Well, when I'm having a rough day, I like to take extra good care of myself at bedtime. I turn on some music... have a bath... maybe do a face mask... Would you like to do that? I always feel so much better after."

My daughter nodded vigorously.

So that night, we did almost exactly what we would have done had it been any other night: I gave her a bath and got her ready for bed.

But this time, we added a few special touches and really sank into the spirit of it, rather than rushing through.

I turned on some Enya (I mean, who else?!), lowered the lights, and gave her a palm-full of body wash, acting like it was liquid gold given to us by the Pharaoh's queen. I told her to lean back, relax, and think about the good things in her life.

(PS. There's something about watching your child bliss out to Enya that will just MAKE YOUR DAY.)

Twenty minutes later, she came out of that bath a different person.

Gone were the meltdowns and the life-is-so-unfair attitude. In their place? A warm-bodied, cheerful 6-year-old who went down for the night easier than she has in weeks.

A 20-minute dose of self-care completely turned my girl's night around.

I'd say I was surprised, but really? I wasn't.

I wasn't surprised because a dose of self-care does exactly the same thing for me. Give me a few intentional minutes of journaling, walking outside, soaking in a bath, doodling to music, or reading purely for fun and I am NOT the same version of me that I was just minutes before.

I've come to believe that self-care isn't about duration; it's about frequency.

You don't necessarily need a 90-minute massage, a half-day spa-treatment, a full night out with friends, or a weekend away with your spouse. (Not that I recommend turning any of those down!)

What you need are small, consistent acts of self-compassion, threaded throughout the days and weeks that make up your life.

- Three deep breaths.
- A gentle mantra repeated in your head.
- A 20-minute jog.
- A hug.
- A mindful walk around the block while on your lunch break.
- Ten minutes of reading some quality fiction rather than scrolling on your phone.
- A hot drink held in two hands.
- Accepting your flaws while gently challenging yourself to grow.
- Forgiving yourself when you've made a mistake.
- Holding your self-worth above all else.

The next time you're tempted to think that you don't have time for "self-care," push back on this thought. Challenge yourself to believe that self-care isn't so much a practice that takes time as a practice that takes persistence.

It's a way of thinking—even more than it's a list of things to do.

In a thousand tiny ways, give yourself the respect, compassion, and care that will allow you to pour back out to the people you love.

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WHAT IS INSIDE

A Transformative Tool for Healing Foster Youth Trauma.....	1
NFAPA Staff / Board of Directors.....	2
Attention Foster Parents!	2
Childhood Trauma Doesn't Determine Your Future, New 12-Year Study Shows	4
Calmer Voices, Calmer Kids.....	5
What Is Co-Regulation?	6
NFAPA Support Groups.....	7
ADHD and Behavior Problems	9
What To Do When Your Child Won't Talk About Being Bullied.....	11
Media Guidelines for Kids of All Ages	13
Self-care: It's Not About Duration-It's About Frequency	15



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