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Treatment for Childhood Emotion Dysregulation



Attend to the child's needs for:

- Love & connection
- Understanding
- Belonging

Attend to the child's needs:

- Agency
- Security
- Affirmation



PARENT TRAINING

Behavioral Strategies

Nonviolent Resistance

Contingency Management & Limit Setting

- Correction
- Overcorrection
- When - then
- Incentives

Reduce Triggers

- A-B-C "Buckets"
- Parent self-regulation
- Validation skills
- "Strike While the Iron is Cold"

Resist Child's Power

- Clear protocol for meltdowns
- Don't try to control the child
- But don't let them control you
- Or allow yourself to be hostage

Reduce Isolation/ Secrecy

- Identify supporters
- Announce to child



"My child needs anger management skills."
"My child needs to talk to someone."
"My child needs tools."

These are common sentiments among parents who are grappling with emotion and behavior dysregulation in their child. It makes sense to think that the solution to troubling behavior in a child involves working individually with the child. However, most evidence-based treatment protocols for dealing with ex-



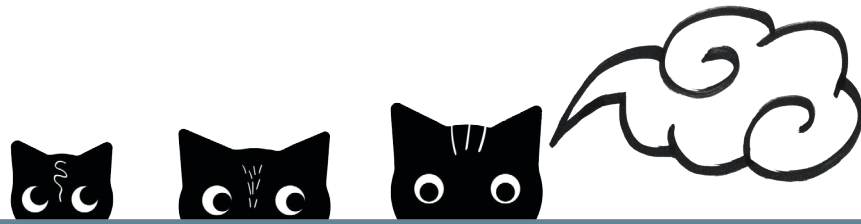
treme behaviors in children are parent-based. This is not because parents are to blame! Rather, it is because parents are their child's most important relationship, parents spend more time than anyone else with their child, and parents exert more influence than anyone else on their child.

Signs of emotion or behavior dysregulation include:

- **Tantrums** • **Meltdowns** • **Aggression**
- **Destructive behavior** • **Screaming**
- **Swearing and insults** • **Threats to harm others**
- **Threats of self-harm or suicide** • **Self-harm**

Parents of kids who are prone to dysregulation often experience a sense of walking on eggshells in their own





home. There can be a sense of feeling hostage by the child's behavior, where parents may go to great lengths to avoid outbursts by their child. It's common for unfair burdens to be placed on siblings to further reduce the chances of a child's dysregulation.

Many children who are prone to dysregulation are not great candidates for individual therapy. Individual therapy requires motivation, insight, and the ability to self-reflect. Individual therapy works best when a person can organize their actions in the service of therapy goals. This is asking a lot of children, many of whom are limited in their capacity to make use of therapy simply because of where they stand developmentally.



That said, direct work with children *can* be a fruitful adjunct to their parents' efforts. Sessions with children can provide useful insights that inform the parenting work. They can also be helpful in establishing a shared vocabulary for the child and parents to use when talking about coping skills, emotions, and problem-solving. We have found that sessions with children have the best chance at being productive if the child is *at least* 8-years old. Again, though, treatment for child emotion dysregulation relies heavily on the parenting components.

Parents can empower themselves immensely by learning protocols and strategies for how to regain a sense of peace and emotional security within their own home. Parents can also learn ways to both prevent outbursts and respond more effectively when meltdowns happen.

We have found that effective treatment for child emotion

dysregulation involves two main categories of intervention.

1) Behavioral strategies: Behavioral strategies comprise the most well established approaches for managing a child's out-of-control behavior. There are decades of research to support the strategies that fall under the behavioral category. These techniques rely on behavior principals about how maladaptive behaviors can get inadvertently reinforced by the environment.

2) Nonviolent Resistance (NVR): NVR, as it applies to parenting, has been in the literature for over 20 years. NVR is grounded in concepts developed by Martin Luther King Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi, both of whom embodied nonviolent resistance in responding to socio-political injustices. Psychologist Haim Omer (at Tel Aviv University) and colleagues have taken NVR concepts and brilliantly applied them to parenting. NVR involves ways to resist efforts by others to control us in harmful ways. At the same time, NVR brings attention to how we may try to solve problems by using control tactics of our own. Efforts to control others are generally counterproductive and tend to make problems worse.

BEHAVIORAL STRATEGIES

CONTINGENCY MANAGEMENT AND LIMIT SETTING

Contingency management goes hand in hand with limit setting. Contingency management is based on principals of "operant" learning. What happens following behavior constitutes a contingency that may or may not reinforce a problem behavior. Many problem behaviors are inadvertently reinforced by the environment so that the child may learn the following:

- "When I scream and yell, my parents back off."*
- "When I start to throw things, my parents give in and give me what I want."*
- "If my parents are afraid of me, they won't make so many demands."*

The child may not consciously think these things, yet many children implicitly learn such associations. You are likely to notice that if you strategically change the events following problem behavior, the problem behavior may reduce.



CORRECTION, OVER-CORRECTION, AND WHEN-THEN

Let's say that in a fit of anger, a child kicked the wall and left a hole. This behavior calls for correction and preferably over-correction. A correction would involve the child patching the hole in the wall. An overcorrection would mean patching all wall areas in the room that need sprucing up. You might be thinking, "but my child would never go along with this. I can't make my child patch the wall!" You are probably right, which is why you also need to blend in when-then. When-then means, for example, that your child loses all tech privileges (or, for older teens, car privileges) until the correction or over-correction is complete – even if it takes weeks for your child to step up.

It's best to prepare the child ahead of time (preferably in writing) that this is the new way that you'll be responding to destructive behavior. If you want to really strengthen this approach, you will also pull in ideas based in NVR. A relevant NVR strategy is to involve a third party (a friend, neighbor, or relative) to work with your child on correcting the destruction that was left by their outburst.



We discourage arbitrary or severe punishments, as these can lead to ruptures in the parent-child relationship and do not lead to positive change. For example, it's unlikely to be productive if a direct consequence to misbehavior is to revoke screen privileges for a week. It's usually more effective to use the when-then paradigm. A work chore designed to fit the child's offense should be offered as a consequence, where the child's screen privileges are suspended until the work chore is complete.

Adaptations are needed when it comes to very young children, who may not be developmentally ready to engage in certain corrective actions or chores. Time-outs can be an effective contingency in response to misbehavior, but most parents will benefit from detailed guidance and practice on how to use time-outs. Without a clear and well-designed protocol, time-outs can backfire.



INCENTIVES

Incentives are another common behavioral strategy that can be used to boost contingency management. The use of incentives (or rewards) is an extensive topic. We hear from many families that "rewards don't work." There is an art and a science to designing an incentive program that your child will care about. I have linked to more detailed articles on the subject in [11 Tips for Effective Commands](#).

REDUCE TRIGGERS

We often are asked, "so what do I do when my child is having a meltdown?"

Unfortunately, once a child is set off, the meltdown will usually have to run its course. There are ways to avoid

adding fuel to the fire, but it's best if you can prevent the outburst all together. The solution to avoiding outbursts is not to let your child be in control of you, however. I'll return to this point in a bit.

A-B-C BASKETS



One of our favorite strategies for reducing outbursts involves a concept known as the A-B-C “baskets.” This paradigm was developed by Ross Greene, author of *The Explosive Child*. Basket A involves rules set by parents that must be followed and without discussion. Usually, rules in basket A are limited to safety issues (wear a seatbelt, wear a bike helmet, etc.).

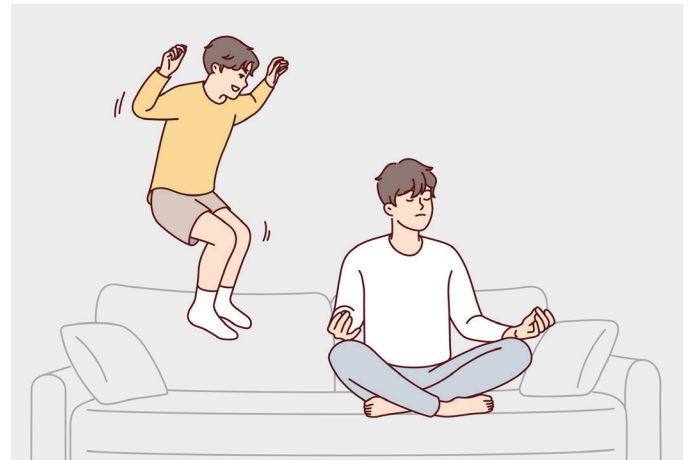
Basket B involves areas that must be addressed, but the solution need not be unilaterally decided by the parent. Examples of issues that belong in basket B include leaving the house on time, completing chores, and brushing teeth. Solutions to basket B involve a strategy called “collaborative problem-solving,” which is fairly complex and can be read about on [Ross Greene’s website](#). Alternatively, issues in basket B may be addressed by using contingency management. For example, a teen who sleeps through an alarm may do well with being allowed to miss the bus to school and have to sit at home all day without tech access. The specifics of problem-solving or contingency management will vary greatly depending on the issues, child, and family.

Basket C is comprised of issues that should be driven by the child’s preferences and agency. Personally, I would put issues such as whether children choose to eat their carrots, whether they comb their hair, and what they

choose to wear as examples of themes that belong in Basket C.

A common problem is when parents put issues that belong in baskets B or C into basket A. When parents treat every challenge as a demand on the child to do things the parent’s way, problems ensue. There are usually better alternatives for handling issues when your child resists your direction.

PARENT SELF-REGULATION



Another powerful strategy focuses on parents’ ability to keep themselves calm and regulated in the face of problem behavior by their child. Some of the worst escalations by children occur in response to a breakdown in self-regulation by their parents. It is completely normal for parents to “lose it” when a child is acting-out, especially when the parent is already stressed out. Everyone has a breaking point! And yet - by increasing parents’ skills to effectively disengage from struggles, the most extreme child escalations can be averted.

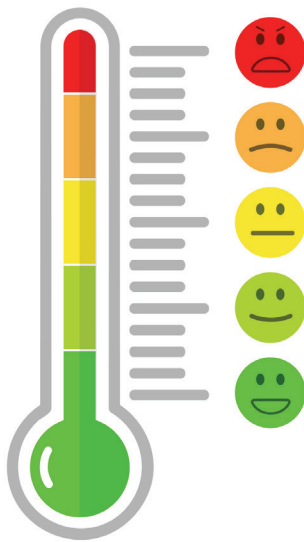
VALIDATION SKILLS

Validation skills extend beyond “emotion coaching” or labeling the child’s emotions. Labeling emotions is a great place to start, but usually it’s best to refrain from talking when the child is spiraling into an escalation. Validation skills may be best deployed when a child is calm or distressed but still in control (in a meltdown state, any words may be experienced by the child as aversive). It’s common for parents to have to dig deep to validate their



child when their child is acting unreasonably. However, well-timed and targeted validation is profoundly calming. A great resource for learning validation skills is the book, *What to say when nothing seems to work: A practical guide for parents and caregivers*, by Adele Lafrance and Ashley Miller.

STRIKE WHILE THE IRON IS COLD



Strike While the Iron is Cold is an NVR strategy, but I've included it here because it is such an effective way to avoid triggering an escalation. When a child has misbehaved, attempts to address the behavior in the moment (or soon after) will likely intensify a child's rage or distress. Few issues need to be resolved right away. It's better to wait several hours or a day (or two) before talking with your child about corrective actions. Ideally, you will have already instructed your child on how you will respond to their misbehavior, so you don't need to go into it now. Or, if addressing the issue yourself is unlikely to go well, this is a good time to bring in one of your third party supporters (see below).

NVR STRATEGIES

RESIST THE CHILD'S POWER

It's critical that parents build awareness of how a child is exerting control over them. The child's control efforts

must not be reinforced. This is difficult, because most parents who are dealing with dysregulated children become habituated to the power that their child holds. Parents commonly lose sight of the many concessions and accommodations that they've made to "keep the peace."



Although I've stressed the importance of reducing triggers, this does not mean that parents should give up their own freedom (or that of siblings) in order to avert meltdowns. When parents commit to living according to their values and protect their self-agency, there might be a temporary increase in child dysregulation. Yet this commitment by parents is key to the dethroning process.

HAVE A CLEAR PROTOCOL FOR RESPONDING TO MELTDOWNS

Get really, really clear and detailed about what you'll do when your child escalates. You may decide to call a neighbor to come support you, or call a friend to have on speaker phone while you disentangle yourself from your child's outburst. You might decide that hanging out in the front yard (in a reverse evacuation) helps to deescalate the situation. The specifics will vary depending on your child, your household, and the nature of your child's escalations.





REDUCE ISOLATION AND SECRECY

Most violence within households is maintained by isolation and secrecy. This holds true whether the enactor of violence (emotional, verbal, or physical) is an adult or a child. One of the key NVR strategies is to “break the seal of secrecy.” We’ve found that most families are scared or reluctant to take this step, yet this might be the most powerful action that parents can take to reduce a child’s dysregulated behavior. We commonly see that family isolation keeps children in power with their coercive or dysregulated behavior.

If you let your child know that you will no longer deal with their violence on your own, you will have their attention. Your child may be angered by this announcement, or maybe not take it seriously. When you show with your actions that any dysregulated behavior will be handled by an adult on your support team, there is likely to be a dramatic and positive shift in your child’s behavior. The role of the support persons is not to shame or condemn your child. Rather, the message should convey that the child is supported, belongs, and will be helped to correct their behavior and make amends.



THE ROLE OF WARMTH AND ACCEPTANCE

Regardless of which strategies a parent chooses to implement, it is always important to attend to a child’s needs for love and connection, acceptance, understanding, and agency. Without these ingredients, nothing will work to reduce the intensity and impact of child dysregulation. Children do best when they are securely attached and feel accepted and understood by their parents. Conveying warmth, acceptance, and understanding can be challenging after your child has screamed the worst insults ever hurled at you. This is all the more reason for parents to feel fully supported by the adults in their lives. When parents’ own needs for understanding and connection are met, then they will be best equipped to be present in a positive way to their children. Many parents find the strategies involving [acceptance, attunement, and affirmation](#) to be helpful.

SUMMARY

Each of the strategies summarized above could be a book in itself. These brief descriptions are not meant to fully equip parents on how to plan for their child’s next outburst. Instead, this summary is intended as an overview and to illustrate a multi-layered effective intervention when it comes to child emotion dysregulation. I also hope that I’ve communicated why treatment that is solely child-centered is likely to fall short. Families must customize plans according to their own needs and the complexity of the situation involving their child – ideally, with the help of a mental health professional.

SUGGESTION FOR ADDITIONAL READING:

In addition to the books and articles referenced above, you might enjoy:

- Non-Violent Resistance: A New Approach to Violent and Self-Destructive Children, Second Edition*, by Haim Omer
- Courageous Parents: Becoming a good anchor for your children*, by Haim Omer
- Parents and Adolescents Living Together, Part 1: The Basics*, by Gerald Patterson
- Parents and Adolescents Living Together, Part 2: Family Problem-Solving*, by Gerald Patterson
- The Kazdin Method for Parenting the Defiant Child*, by Alan Kazdin

