

Defusing Explosive Children

In 1998, Dr. Ross Greene wrote a bestselling book titled *The Explosive Child*. I interviewed him on The Happy Families podcast, and our discussions became some of our most listened-to conversations.

His philosophy: “Kids do well if they can.”

In my words: Competence. A challenging situation presents itself. Capable kids navigate it, often with confidence. If they’re not quite there but believe they can do it, they’ll go for it. But if they’re incompetent, they pull back. Feeling incompetent can lead to withdrawal or explosions. And they don’t do well... *because they can’t!*

Greene describes incompetence in a gentler way: *lagging skills*.

Lagging skills are the missing pieces in a child’s skill set, hindering their ability to meet the demands of the moment. These lagging skills are flexibility and adaptability, frustration tolerance, problem-solving, and emotion regulation.

Let’s break them down:

Flexibility and Adaptability

A disrupted routine or inadequate time to prepare for a transition to a new activity (leaving the park, taking a bath, or switching off a screen) requires this skill. So does a change in plans. But it’s a skill that takes time, practice, and support to develop. Its opposite: rigidity and tunnel vision.

Frustration Tolerance

When the bottom drops out, expectations are unmet, or delayed gratification is required, frustration tolerance is what stops an emotional outburst. It’s recognising things didn’t work out according to my agenda, and then managing the frustration, expressing it appropriately, and thinking clearly.

High emotions = low intelligence. Frustration tolerance keeps emotions level and stable, and allows us (or our child) to sit in that emotion without acting rashly.

Problem Solving

Unpredictability, randomness, and volatility are inescapable realities of most of our lives. Being flexible and adaptable and having frustration tolerance keep emotions stable and facilitate

creative, broad thinking so we (and our kids) can solve problems effectively.

A parent's fundamental job, besides keeping their child safe, is to help them learn to solve problems. How do they resolve a problem with a sibling? How do they navigate a friendship challenge at school? What is the best way forward with an academic question?

Emotion Regulation

Frustration tolerance is a crucial component of a much larger challenge: emotion regulation, which means expressing and suppressing emotions appropriately.

Our words matter. They shape our perceptions and build the world we live in.

Remember:

Your child isn't 'naughty.' They have some lagging skills that we can develop.

Your child isn't trying to ruin your life. Kids do well if they can.

Your child isn't an idiot or a pain. Your child doesn't have the competence to get it right... yet.

Even if they've done it right before. Even if they're laughing about it and you sense they're being malicious. Even if they're being disrespectful. Even if they're insisting that they 'can't'.

When they're stuck:

1. Soften your eyes. Look upon them with compassion and kindness. Remember that kids do well if they can, so if they can't right now, there's something going on. Hungry? Angry? Lonely/Disconnected? Tired? Stressed? Sick? Overstimulated?
2. Say what you see. If you can name it, you can tame it.
3. Ask if they want you with them or if they want space.
4. As emotions subside, explore their world and their challenges. Explain what you are looking for. And empower them through problem-solving. Support those skills of flexibility and adaptability, frustration tolerance, problem-solving, and emotion regulation.
5. Make a plan so they can try to do better next time.

Dr. Greene's 'Collaborative and Proactive Solutions' framework teaches parents to help children develop these skills (which often lag) in order to solve problems.



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