

Helping Little People Manage Big Feelings

By Dr Justin Coulson

If you've ever had your three-year-old lash out — maybe with a hit, a push, or a full-body meltdown in the middle of the supermarket — you're not alone. Every parent of a preschooler has been there.

Yes, it's frustrating. Sometimes it's embarrassing. It can even feel a little worrying.

But note: **big feelings are normal at this age.**

Good news though: if you navigate these big feelings wisely, your child will learn to regulate their emotions effectively over the coming years.

Why Young Children Struggle With Big Feelings

Toddler's and young children's brains are still "under construction." The prefrontal cortex — the brain region responsible for emotional regulation, impulse control, and planning — doesn't fully mature until the mid-[20s](#)! At around age three, children are only just beginning to develop the neural pathways needed for self-regulation. They still don't understand having to wait (delayed gratification), not having their way (frustration tolerance), and don't even get me started on "use your words". They can't!

When a child's emotions surge — whether from tiredness, hunger, or disappointment — their limbic system (the "feeling brain") overwhelms their developing prefrontal cortex (the "thinking brain"). This is why reasoning with a three-year-old mid-tantrum usually doesn't work. Their capacity for logical thinking is offline. They've "flipped their lid"!

What Parents Can Do in the Moment

So, what's actually helpful when your child is hitting, screaming, or overwhelmed? Here are three practical, evidence-based strategies:

1. Distraction Works

When emotions run high, cognitive capacity runs low. A simple shift of attention — pointing out a bird outside, suggesting a new activity, or even singing a silly song — can help a child's nervous system reset. This isn't "rewarding bad behaviour." It's a developmentally appropriate strategy that buys time until their thinking brain comes back [online](#).

2. Co-Regulation: Lending Your Calm

Children learn emotional regulation through co-regulation — essentially borrowing their caregiver's calm nervous system to settle their [own](#). Try gentle words like, "*I can see you're*

upset. Do you want a hug, or do you need some space?" If they say they want to be left alone, respect that. If they want connection, just sitting quietly or offering a cuddle can make a huge difference. Your calm presence teaches them what regulation feels like in their body.

3. Don't Fix It Straight Away

Parents naturally want to solve problems on the spot. But problem-solving while emotions are high is like trying to hold a board meeting during a fire drill - no one's listening to what you're saying. Wait until your child is calm before teaching, explaining, or setting limits. This "connect before you correct" approach is far more effective.

Building Skills for the Long Term

Whilst managing the immediate moment matters - we don't want your child hurting anyone or breaking things - your broader goal is helping your child develop emotional regulation skills over time. Research shows that most children develop adequate self-regulation abilities by around age nine, though the foundations are built throughout early and middle [childhood](#).

This means consistently naming emotions ("You're feeling frustrated because the tower fell down"), modelling calm responses to your own frustrations, and gradually teaching simple coping strategies like taking deep breaths or asking for help. These repeated experiences literally wire your child's developing brain for better [regulation](#).

A Helpful Mindset for Parents

It's easy to feel judged when your child explodes in public. But every parent has been there. Stay regulated! Focus on showing compassion — to your child, and to yourself. Big feelings are part of growing up, and with your patient, consistent guidance, your child will gradually learn how to manage them.

Tantrums, hitting, and meltdowns don't mean your child is "naughty." Reframe from the thought of 'having to deal with a challenging child' to 'I'm helping my child deal with a challenge'.

Your job isn't to stop all the big feelings or to expect premature self-control (remember: age 9!), but to guide your child through those big feelings until their brain is ready to do more of the work on its own. This is the patient, relational work of raising emotionally healthy humans.

Next time your child has a big emotion, pause and ask yourself, *"What does my child need to feel safe or understood right now?"* instead of *"How do I stop this behaviour?"*

For more information, grab a copy of my book [What Your Child Needs From You](#).



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