

## Dealing With Meltdowns

Rage is one of the core emotional systems that kicks in when we feel like we are being physically or mentally restrained. Frustration is part of our core emotional system, as is anger. We have the ability to rage from birth as it acts as a type of energizer to get us to safety. Hold a baby's arms to his or her sides and you'll witness the rage system in full action.

When we see our children acting in frustration, anger and rage we need to see that as a signal that there is a problem.

Anger is a strong response to environment and because of its strength created by the hormones and neurotransmitters that flood the brain, anger can take a while to subside, and many times is never forgotten. I'm sure most of us have incidents in our lives that even thinking about them briefly can still make us mad—increase our heart rate, raise our blood pressure and begin hyperventilation.

Because rage and anger can be difficult emotions to control, our cultural bias may communicate to our children that anger is wrong, bad, scary and dangerous, and is to be avoided. There are ways, though, to use our anger to our benefit.

**Naming the experience.** When we see angry behavior, we can simply say to our children, "I see that you are angry." When we are angry we can also name the experience by stating, "I am feeling angry, frustrated, furious, etc." Many times just naming the emotion begins to calm our nervous system.

**Have expression tools handy.** In my preschool classroom I had papers and bold tipped markers handy for the upset child. When a child entered the classroom upset, I'd sit the child down with the markers and a 24" x 36" piece of paper. I'd tell the child to draw what he or she felt, and that we would talk when he or she finished. Watching out of the corner of my eye (or using those proverbial eyes in the back of my head) I'd make note of the sequence of colors used. When the child came to me and said he or she was finished—this might take up to half an hour for a preschooler—I'd start to work on getting the story. "Tell me about the yellow," I said and went through in sequence of each color used. A story would emerge and I'd repeat each sentence as new information appeared. The child became calmer as he or she was heard.

**Teach some language and coping skills.** The adage of counting to ten is perhaps sound advice. Counting causes our thinking to shift to logical thinking versus emotional thinking. Upset? Count to ten or twenty before you do anything. If you're still angry try to leave and go to a quiet spot. We used to play the "What If" game in our

preschool class using some typical incidents that occur in a classroom. In a small group of around six children I'd ask, "What if Johnny took your swing on the playground? How would you feel? What would you do what could you say?" We'd practice using a phrase, "I feel (emotion) when you (action). I would like to (action). Would you please (action). Or in this example—I feel angry when you take my swing. I would like to swing. Please give me back my swing.

We'd also talk about getting an adult to help if you couldn't solve your problems with words.

Being able to name emotion, to express emotion through coloring and drawing, and to have vocabulary to express emotions, wants and needs help calm the emotional part of our children's brains. Feeling safe and being able to communicate fears prevent and defuse meltdowns.

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