



# Pathways to Success

Helpful Strategies for Parents and Caregivers of Young Children

## Helping Children Understand and Deal With Their Emotions

It is normal to have a range of different emotions throughout the day– to feel happy, sad, mad, frustrated, and scared. Children need adults to help them learn how to manage these emotions. This is called *emotion coaching*.

Our emotions are like temperatures. A child’s emotional temperature can get too high – they can get silly or aggressive. A child’s emotional temperature can get too low – they can get very sad and cry.

Children need adults to help be their “emotional thermostat.” A thermostat helps keep the temperature in a house in the “just right” zone (not too high, not too low). You can use emotion coaching to help a child calm down when they are upset or too silly, or perk up when they feel very sad.

Some children need lots of emotion coaching, while others may need less. Children who have speech and language delays may have a difficult time handling emotions because they struggle to find the words to communicate what they are feeling and to ask for what they want or need.

Sometimes, adults deal with children’s emotions by dismissing them. They may be frustrated with a child who is sad or mad. Adults may tell children: “You’re fine,” or “Just calm down,” or “Be a big boy/girl.” They may tell a crying child, “That’s enough.” Adults may even punish children for being mad or sad; they may give them a “time out” until they can calm down.

Children who have adults in their lives who use emotion coaching learn about emotions in healthy ways, tend to do better in school, make stronger friendships, and even get sick less often. Children learn how to manage their emotions in appropriate ways and develop empathy for others.

### The Steps to Emotion Coaching

It is important to consider yourself as a role model. How do you handle your emotions? How do you calm down when you are upset?

It is important that children learn that *all feelings are okay, but not all actions are okay*. For example, it is okay that Emily feels sad when Derek got to sit in the red chair. It is not okay if Emily hits Derek because he is sitting in the chair she wants.

We must take children’s feelings and perspectives seriously. Try to put yourself in a child’s shoes. If you were sad and someone told you to “snap out of it,” you probably wouldn’t feel very good. A child who is sad, mad, or scared needs an adult to help him/her feel better and solve the problem.

(see over)



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## You can use the DNAR strategy<sup>1</sup> to help a child when he/she is upset:

**D = Describe:** Describe to the child the action you see. You can say, “Your face is going like this”, using his/her own body to show the child. You can also comment on other parts of the child’s body in the same way (e.g., “your hands are going like this!”). This step gets the child to look at you and shows that you see how the child is feeling.

**N = Name:** Name the emotion. You give the child a word to help identify his/her emotion. You can say, “You look [mad/sad/scared].” By saying *you look*, you are taking a guess at the child’s emotions, not telling him/her how she is supposed to feel.

**A = Acknowledge:** Acknowledge the child’s feelings. You can guess *why* the child is upset. You can say, “You wish you could have...” or “You really wanted the...” or “It’s so sad when...” etc. This is the most important step and communicates that you really understand the child’s point of view. You may have to acknowledge the child’s point of view several times for the child to really feel like you understand them.

**R = Redirect:** Redirect and help the child to find an alternative solution. For example, if the child really wants to stay playing outside, but it is time to come in, you could say, “I know you love to play outside, and wish you could stay there. We can play outside again later! Right now it is lunch time. Do you want an apple or a banana with your sandwich?” Offering choices helps the child focus on what he/she does have control over.

You may also help a child find the words to say to get what he/she wants in an appropriate way. For example, “We do not hit. If you want a turn with the red ball, you can say, “*Can I have a turn?*” Many younger children have trouble using their words when they are very frustrated, sad, mad, or scared. It is important to remember to acknowledge the child’s point of view before using the redirection step.

## Remember: Describe, Name, Acknowledge, Redirect

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<sup>1</sup> The DNAR strategy was adapted by Providence’s Dr. Theanna Bischoff from the DNA strategy (Dr. Becky Bailey – Managing Emotional Mayhem) and the ACT with Limit Setting model (Dr. Gary Landreth – Play Therapy: The Art of the Relationship).