



# Pathways to Success

Helpful Strategies for Parents and Caregivers of Young Children

## Supporting a Child's Emotions: Connection Before Redirection

It is very common for young children to have tantrums, meltdowns or strong emotional outbursts. There are things we can do to help support children when their emotions get out of control.

- **Expectations:** Just like adults who get overwhelmed when they have too much work or stress, the same can happen for children. A child may need more free time to play, more time to rest or nap, more to eat, more time to move around and be active, or more cuddles.

Think about whether you are asking too much of a child – for example, if a child has trouble sitting still for a long time, can you shorten the amount of time you are asking them to sit still?

- **Connect and Soothe:** When a child is very upset, they are trying to tell you they need help to solve their problem. If a child is crying, frustrated or angry, first connect with and soothe the child. If a child is very sad or mad, get at or below their eye level and talk quietly.

Label the child's feelings and tell them you understand how they are feeling. Give the child a hug or offer something you know they find soothing and comforting.

- **Redirection:** When the child is calmer, talk about what was bothering them. Try to meet the child's needs in an appropriate way. For example, if a child was upset because they could not play on the playground, say you understand how disappointed he/she is and then try to find a game to play inside together. If a child was coloring on the walls and you took the crayons away, show the child where he/she *can* color – on paper.

This is called **redirection** – teaching a child what he or she *can* do. When something is taken away from a child, we must try to replace it with something appropriate.

Think about the times you have been very upset as an adult. It is helpful when a friend listens, tries to understand, comfort, and then helps you solve the problem. Responding to an emotional child in a positive and supportive way, helping calm them first and then teaching the child a solution for next time, helps to reduce outbursts and makes children feel loved and safe. This calm and supportive approach helps children understand their emotions and limits.

Young children need adult support and repetitive teaching. We cannot expect a child to learn a lesson the first time it is taught. A child who tantrums or misbehaves is telling you he or she needs adult support, supervision, structure, and teaching.

**Remember: first connection, then redirection.**