

When Things Fall Apart With Your Toddler

BY DEBORAH GROENING-ROTHER, PsyD.



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You're having a great time with your little one when suddenly things take a turn for the worse. How do you turn them back around?

Difficult times with your toddler can actually be rich opportunities to connect — if you approach the situation mindfully. I know in the moment you just want your child's "big feelings" to Go Away. Studies show, however, that this is exactly when the attachment system kicks in — the opportunity for us as parents to provide our little ones with a lifelong sense of security and trust in others,

beginning with trust in us. A secure attachment is when the child finds the parent to be their "safe haven" in times of distress.

When you become angry or punish your child with a time out, your child may show increased anger due to separation anxiety, or display withdrawal behaviors indicating that she has decided "no one is there to help me when I am upset." Inadvertently, your angry reaction could be interpreted by your child as: "your negative feelings are unacceptable to me; please do not show them to me." Using parental reflective functioning (or mindfulness) to help your child cope with his/her frustrations, you will more likely turn your child's anger into sadness, displays of dependency, and finally, loving feelings.

The mindfulness tips below will help you to respond to the emotions rather than the behavior. This approach builds deep, everlasting trust, but requires a bit of inner work:

1. First, ask yourself what the behavior is triggering in you and why.
2. Second, ask yourself what your child might be communicating.
3. Third, respond to the underlying feelings. They often reflect an unmet need, wish, want, fantasy, desire, or all of the above. This must be understood but not necessarily gratified. Empathize, but don't give in even when the feelings become more challenging.

Reflective function, or mindfulness, allows you to respond with a calm, centered state of mind. Once calm, you are more able to practice the art of observation followed by narration in order to communicate more effectively with your child.

For example, how does your child currently respond when stressed or frustrated? Does she throw herself on to the floor screaming bloody murder, push you away demanding "to be left alone" — or run into your arms seeking comfort and containment? Optimally, your answer is the last one. Once clear about this, ask yourself what he/she might be communicating, and how you can assist.

Using narration technique (or "sports casting") will let your child know that you understand what's going on ("I see you are not ready to stop playing"). Remember: If she's giving you a hard time, she's having a hard time; so focus with compassion on what she is going through — good, bad, right or wrong. Stating her point of view does not necessarily mean agreeing with it. ("Not wanting mommy to give you your bath. You aren't ready yet."). Then, offer a solution and set a limit ("So in 5 minutes you can either get into the bath all by yourself or I'll help you. You can choose.")

Notice what happens when you validate her experience before setting the limit. Often, respect and understanding is all she really wanted. Once she feels your empathy, she will usually calm down and cooperate. If she is still upset, stay with her experience, narrating ("now I'm going to help you into the bath. You're not yet able to stop your body but I don't like being hit so I'm going to stop your body."). Bearing witness to your child's struggle without trying to fix it — or condone it — is a true gift. Equanimity is a mindful parent's best tool.

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