

\_BEHAVIOR AND LIFE SKILLS

# How Our Reactions to Kids' Misbehavior Steers Their Future Outbursts

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Are you the type of parent who freaks out when your kid does something bad, or can you hold it together and calmly discipline your child? It is never easy when our children misbehave, whether they are screaming while you are trying to talk on the phone or running around the grocery store touching everything they can get their hands on. But the way in which we react to this irritating behavior can influence how our kids learn to regulate their own emotions and behavior in the future, [according to a new study published in Developmental Psychology by the University of Illinois](#).

For those of us who tend to overreact and stress out when our kids do something to get under our skin, it may be time to step back so that we can readjust our own reactions in order to help our children in their emotional development. As challenging as our children's tantrums, meltdowns, and screaming fits can be, the study's researchers point out that they are excellent opportunities for us to teach our children how to handle their emotions.

The study explored possible predictors of mothers' behavior during emotional challenges they face with their kids. The goal was to help parents identify strategies to better manage their own emotions when their children act out.

In order to do this, researchers looked at both supportive and non-supportive behaviors by the mothers in reaction to their children's poor behavior. Supportive behaviors include distracting children, validating their feelings, or providing reasons why they should or should not act in a certain way. Non-supportive behaviors include ignoring children, physically moving them, taking something away

from them, or interrupting them instead of listening to them. Past research suggests that ignoring our children's behavior, threatening or punishing them, or telling them that they are overreacting may prevent them from learning to effectively manage their emotions. On the other hand, support from parents has been shown to be very beneficial to children.

To test these theories, more than 120 toddlers and their mothers participated in a five-minute snack delay experiment. The children could see a snack sitting in a clear lunchbox, but were told that they must wait while their mother filled out paperwork before they could have the snack. The task was frustrating for both the mothers and toddlers because the mothers had to focus on their task at hand and keep the child from opening the lunchbox, while the child had to sit and wait for the snack. The researchers tracked the mothers' supportive behavior as well as the toddlers' negative emotions and disruptive behavior. Additionally, the mothers answered questions about how they usually respond to stressful situations involving their children.

Overall, the children reacted as expected for their age. They tried to grab their mom's pen or get her attention in other ways. Some children even tried to open the box on their own. The mothers responded in a number of ways to their children's disruptive behavior, depending on how stressed they felt. The researchers determined that the children's behavior leads to the mom's behavior. In fact, mothers who reported more stress as a result of their children's behavior showed less support for their children overall. Ultimately, the supportive behaviors are more beneficial to both the children and mothers.

What advice can we surmise from this study? We should try to be more mindful of whether we are experiencing stress when our children misbehave and how we react to their behavior. Try some of these strategies to manage your own emotions in these moments to ensure that your children will develop strong emotional intelligence in the long run.

### **Make being calm your priority**

Tell yourself that no matter what happens today, you will remain calm and collected. Do whatever you need to do to stay in this serene place – say a mantra, listen to music, think about a lovely vacation.

### **Focus on your own behavior**

We will never be satisfied if we try to change other people's behavior, including our own flesh and blood's. This has to be about you changing how you react to your children. When you focus on your life and goals, you will have more connection and influence over your child.

### **Try not to take it personally**

You will never be able to relax if you make every misstep your children take all about you. Your children's behavior is their choice, and how you react is your choice.

### **Think before you react**

Make decisions from your head instead of from your emotions to avoid getting too angry and frustrated with your kids.

### **Take a pause during the craziness**

As soon as you feel your blood pressure rising, take a five-breath pause. Try this little trick – look down at your hand and take a slow, deep breath for each of your five fingers. This pause will help you to focus and regroup.

### **Talk it out with your kids**

Once the meltdown has passed, have a conversation with your child about how they were feeling and why they were acting that way. By calmly discussing the situation that occurred, you can help your child handle their emotions better next time.

### **Take time for yourself**

All parents need a break at some point. Make sure to schedule in some "me time" like a mani/pedi, yoga class, or lunch with friends so you can get a break from mommy time stress.



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