

Helping at Home: Tips for Parents

1. The first rule of caring for your child's emotional or behavior struggles is that there are no rules. Parenthood doesn't come with a manual and there will be a lot of trial and error as you figure out what works best to help your child.



2. Cover the basics. Before you dismiss your child's outburst as a lack of control, ask yourself if there is a simple explanation for what's going on. Are they hungry or thirsty? Are they too hot or cold? Are they overstimulated? Did they get enough sleep? Are they feeling under the weather (i.e. – colds, allergies, headaches, upset stomachs)?



3. Pick your battles. Ask yourself if this specific behavior is doing any harm, or if it's just annoying—annoying probably isn't worth arguing over. If you do get in an argument with your child, resist the urge to raise your voice. Be matter-of-fact and stand your ground.



4. Environment matters. Do your best to create a home that is low on stress, safe, and supportive. A “Mary Poppins”-type household would be great, but let's get real. If you and your significant other get in a fight, keep it away from the kids. Give reasonable timelines for getting chores done. Praise your child for the things they do well and let them know that you love them.



5. Encourage communication. Let your child know that they can talk to you about their thoughts, feelings, or difficult situations they're dealing with. When they do come to you, really listen to what they have to say. You may not agree or understand, but you need to accept that the difficulties they are having are very real to them. Think about things you struggled with when you were their age. Check out our [mental health conversation starters](#).



6. Timing is everything. In stressful situations, allow your child some space and address issues later when they have regained control over themselves, otherwise you're basically pouring gasoline on a fire.



7. Create calm. A child in crisis and out of control cannot rely on reason. Your gut reaction may be to panic or go into mama/papa bear mode, but they rely on you to help them regain a sense of calm and stability. Soften your voice and use short, clear directions: "Come with me." "Sit down." "Take a deep breath." "Tell me what's going on."



8. Help them to help themselves. Check out [Helpful vs Harmful--Ways to Manage Emotions](#), for a breakdown of constructive ways to deal with feelings. It's great for your child in the long-term and their teachers will also appreciate strong coping skills. Praise successes and use failures as learning opportunities. Ask questions like, "What can you do the next time you're in this situation?" or "What made you feel better the last time you felt this way?"



9. Tackle troubling thoughts. Sometimes the brain can play tricks on us. We've all had something unsettling cross our minds or have assumed someone was mad at us when they weren't. Break down problem thoughts and bring your child back to reality. For instance, if they think that a friend doesn't like them anymore, ask them why they think that and if their friend did anything to make them think that way. Or if they are worried that you are going to get hurt in a car accident, remind them that you drive safely to and from work and/or school every day and that your car has airbags to help keep you safe. If there seems to be a bigger problem with anxiety or depression, take the [Parent Screen](https://mhascreening.org) at mhascreening.org to see if professional help may be needed.



10. Create routines. Routines give a sense of stability to children and teens, especially those who struggle with anxiety. Keep both bedtime and the morning in mind. The Sleep Foundation recommends 9-11 hours of sleep for children ages 6-13, and 8-10 hours of sleep each night for teens ages 14-17. Make sure that your morning routine includes a healthy, low-sugar breakfast, which keeps young people from getting tired in school and helps improve attention span.



11. Check your tone. You may find it tempting to blame problem behaviors on your child hanging out with the "wrong group of friends" - but if you use an accusatory tone, odds are your son or daughter will stop listening. Frame your approach from a place of care and concern, not anger.



12. Learn from other parents. Each state sponsors a Family Run Organization to provide educational advocacy for youth with mental or behavioral health struggles. They have many tools, workshops and conferences to share with parents and caregivers on how to advocate for these young people. Find an organization in your state at <http://familyorgdirectory.fmhi.usf.edu/map.cfm>.

Adapted from Red Flags, *“Coping with Depression at Home.”*