

# How to Teach Frustration Tolerance to Kids

By Katie Hurley, LCSW

[Social & Emotional Learning](#)

A mother of a six-year-old boy called me in tears. After yet another meltdown in his classroom, the teacher requested a meeting with the parents. The mother assured me that her son is sweet, funny and very bright. He's the life of the party at home and has tons of friends. The meltdowns, she thought, paled in comparison to the rest of his personality.

The problem, of course, is that the meltdowns affected his ability to learn. When her son encountered something frustrating, he “flipped a switch.” He went from happy and engaged to angry and screaming in an instant. This pulled the teacher away from the class, negatively affecting the entire kindergarten classroom.

It didn't take long to determine that it wasn't so much that he “flipped a switch” when he encountered something hard, but that the buildup of frustration over time resulted in huge meltdowns when he finally hit his tipping point. He was missing his anger cues throughout the day, and that caused a flood of emotions when he confronted something particularly frustrating.

Many young children struggle with frustration tolerance. Anger and frustration are powerful emotions, and children's reactions can be intense in the moment. As adults, we know when our anger buttons are pushed. We know what we need to do to work through something frustrating in an appropriate manner. Kids, however, don't enter this world with a pocket full of frustration management skills.

Developing coping strategies to deal with frustration requires time and practice.

The good news is that parents can help kids build frustration tolerance skills at home. With a little bit of guidance (and a lot of patience), you can teach your little one how to cope when the going gets tough.

**Try a little body mapping.** Young children don't make the connections between their bodies and their emotions. I know, for example, that a sore neck means I'm under stress. Given that knowledge, I can take a moment to figure out what I need to do to decrease my stress level. Children struggle to draw those conclusions. They might experience sore muscles from clenching their fists, but they won't stop to think about how their emotional states contribute to those sore muscles.

Body mapping is one of my favorite strategies from “[The Happy Kid Handbook](#)” because it helps kids of all ages. Draw the outline of a person (or if you're like me, Google and print). Ask your child to think about all the places on his body that feel sore or different when he's mad. You might point out that your heart races when you're mad, and that makes your head feel dizzy. Doing this exercise *with* your child is important. Color all of those places red. Tell your child that when those places start to feel red, his body is signaling him to get help in a frustrating moment.

**Learn about triggers.** All kids are different and no two will have the exact same triggers of frustration, but there are a few common triggers to watch for:

- transitions
- negative peer interactions (or perceived negative interactions)
- challenging academics (yes, even in preschool—cutting with scissors can be very frustrating)
- feeling misunderstood by adults or peers
- lack of control

- hunger
- exhaustion
- unexpected situations

You can help your child understand his specific triggers by keeping a trigger tracker. When you talk about a frustrating situation with your child, make a note of what happened just prior to the event, the time of day and what was happening when the meltdown occurred.

**Create a mad list.** When my son was younger, a mad list was the secret to helping him vent his frustration. Young children need to vent (just like adults), but they don't yet know how to do that. Screaming and flailing feels good in the moment, so they go with what works.

Ask your child to name all of the things that make him mad. Write down his list on a piece of paper while he vents his emotions. Provide empathy and understanding while you do this. Kids need to feel understood, and a simple, "Ooh, that makes me mad, too!" shows that you get it. Once the list is complete, ask your child to tear it into tiny pieces (this provides a much needed physical release of emotion) and throw them in the air. Then collect the pieces together and throw them out for good.

**Teach the stoplight with deep breathing.** You've probably heard a lot about the power of [deep breathing](#) lately, and for good reason. When done properly, deep breathing can calm a child's senses and help that child work through a frustrating event without resorting to screaming.

The best time to practice deep breathing is when you're both calm. Until they get the hang of it, kids have a tendency to associate deep breathing with rapid breathing, which has the opposite effect.

Ask your child to sit comfortably and relax his muscles. Count to four while your child inhales, count to three while your child holds his breath, and then count to four while your child exhales. Repeat several times and practice regularly (bonus tip: this also works wonders for worriers). I like to have my kids "breathe the rainbow" by picturing one color with each breath while visualizing their favorite things in that color (strawberries, cherries and bouncy balls, oh my!)

Next, teach the stoplight. All kids know that red means stop, yellow means slow down, and green means go. Take it a step further by teaching them to visualize a red light to stop in a moment of frustration. This is when they can tap into deep breathing to calm their minds and bodies. When they shift to a yellow light, they should think of three possible solutions (Ask the teacher for help? Try again? Ask a friend?). When they visualize the green light, they can pick an option and move forward. Go ahead and create a big stoplight out of construction paper to tape to your fridge for reference. Over time, this process will become second nature and the meltdowns will fade away.

### **About Katie Hurley, LCSW**

Katie Hurley, LCSW is a child and adolescent psychotherapist and parenting educator in Los Angeles, CA and the author of [The Happy Kid Handbook: How to Raise Joyful Children in a Stressful World](#)(Tarcher/Penguin 2015).

[http://www.pbs.org/parents/expert-tips-advice/2016/02/teach-frustration-tolerance-kids/?utm\\_source=facebook&utm\\_medium=pbsparents&utm\\_campaign=parents\\_expert](http://www.pbs.org/parents/expert-tips-advice/2016/02/teach-frustration-tolerance-kids/?utm_source=facebook&utm_medium=pbsparents&utm_campaign=parents_expert)