

Helping Sensitive Kids Manage Their Emotions

By Claire Lerner

Valerie very calmly explains to her 4-year-old, Martin, that when he places a cup down on their glass coffee table he needs to be gentle. His response? “DON’T EVER SAY THAT TO ME AGAIN! Do you understand?!” This reaction is not unusual for Martin — he explodes like this on a regular basis, whenever his parents need to correct him or set a limit, or when he can’t do something perfectly right away. When they try to reason with him he shuts down — he’ll often just cover his ears or run away.

This is a great example of temperament at work. [Temperament](#) describes a person’s nature, how they are wired to respond to their experiences in the world. It is the “why” that helps us understand the meaning of someone’s behavior. It is something we are all born with, not something children choose or that parents create. It’s why some of us enjoy new experiences and others need time to warm up to unfamiliar situations.

Children like Martin have a more sensitive temperament, meaning they experience and react to their feelings more deeply. They are more likely to feel overwhelmed or out of control when being corrected by an adult or when they don’t excel immediately at a task. And when they feel out of control on the inside they act out of control on the outside. While Martin expresses these sensitive feelings by shouting, another child might burst into tears or throw a tantrum when feeling overwhelmed.

What can parents do to help especially sensitive children learn to manage their emotions and cope?

- **[Remain calm and try not to get reactive yourself.](#)** This tends to increase children’s distress, leading to more out-of-control behavior. Model the behavior you want to see from your children. Remember not to take their words literally. Young children are driven by emotions and are irrational by nature. When children lash out, it is their way of saying they are overwhelmed and are having a hard time coping. They don’t literally mean what they say. (“I hate you” doesn’t mean they actually hate you.) The more you react to their behavior, the more you reinforce it.
- **[Acknowledge your child’s feelings and keep language brief and simple.](#)** We tend to say too much when trying to calm children, thinking (hoping!) that, somehow, we can talk them out of their upset. But when children are out of control, they can’t process all those words and ideas and attempting to do so just further overwhelms them. The most sensitive and effective response is to simply acknowledge your child’s emotional state. Say something brief and empathetic such as, “Wow, those are very big feelings.” This helps your child calm down and communicates that you are his rock; that he can trust you to stay calm and understanding during his most challenging moments and that he is not alone.
- **[Reflect on the encounter when your child is calm.](#)** Our natural impulse as adults is to use logic to teach our kids a lesson in these maddening moments. But when children are overwhelmed emotionally, they don’t have access to the part of the brain that enables them to think and reason. Wait until your child has calmed down to engage in any teaching.
- **[Talk with your child.](#)** Retell the story matter-of-factly: “Mommy asked you to be gentle when you put down your cup on the glass table because it is fragile and can break. I meant this to be helpful — just like when your teachers give you a direction at school — but you got very upset.” Pause to allow your child to respond. You might ask to see if he thought you were angry or were criticizing him. Explain that sometimes people hear things in a way that the other person doesn’t mean. This helps him begin to understand his feelings and reactions.
- **[Recall past experiences when your child successfully managed a challenging moment.](#)** “Remember when you fell off your scooter. Daddy tried to help but you got really mad at him because you didn’t like the feeling of falling. It made you feel out of control. Daddy understood and just stayed by your side. When you were calm he showed you how to balance and you were off!”
- **[Let your child know you will be his partner in learning to manage his big feelings.](#)** One of the greatest gifts you give your child is letting him know you understand, accept and appreciate him; that you won’t minimize or judge his feelings and will help him cope when he is having a hard time managing his big emotions.

It’s also important to be aware that some children who are emotionally sensitive also have some physical or sensory sensitivity. For example, a child who is sensitive to textures may have big

reactions to foods and thus be a picky eater, or be very selective about the clothes he wears. A child who is sensitive to sound may get overwhelmed in a busy preschool classroom, cover her ears at seemingly manageable noises or sound-levels, and spend more time in solitary play in a corner of the room where she feels more protected and safe. Children whose sensory systems are highly sensitive and reactive tend to feel out of control more easily, which can result in big emotional reactions. This is something to keep in mind and potentially explore as you are decoding the meaning of your child's behavior.