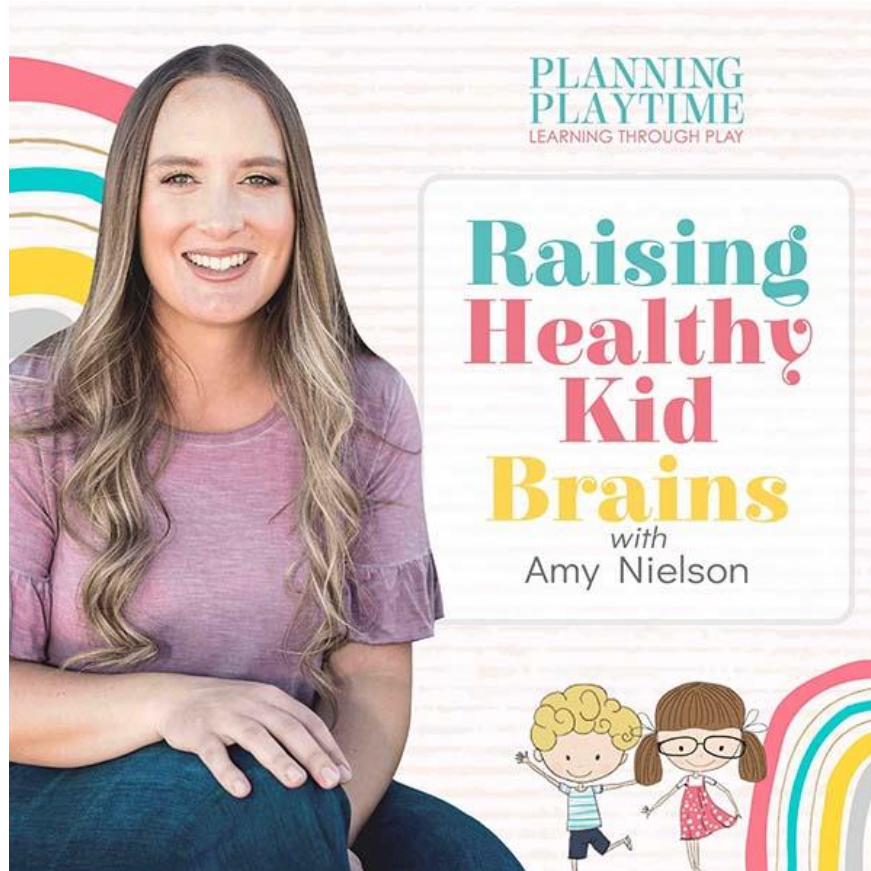


Ep #2: Five Tips for Supporting Your Child's Big Emotions



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Amy Nielson

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Do you ever find yourself trying to fix your child's big emotions and make it all better? How should we respond instead and what language can we use to help children develop the skills and confidence to regulate those big emotions? Find out in today's episode of the Raising Healthy Kid Brains podcast.

Welcome to the Raising Healthy Kid Brains podcast where moms and teachers come to learn all about kids' brains, how they work, how they learn, how they grow and simple tips and tricks for raising the most resilient, kind, smart, compassionate kids we can. All while having lots of grace and compassion for ourselves because you know what? We all really need and deserve that too. I am your host, Amy Nielson. Let's get ready to start the show.

Think with me for just a minute to the last time your child had a big emotion or a tantrum. What did it look like? Was it loud and crazy? Was it at the grocery store, when you were dropping them off for school? And how did you respond? If you are like most parents we try to fix it. We want to fix the hard thing. And we often do that in two different ways. So one is trying to behavior fix. We're trying to fix that bad behavior. And we're going to do that with either a consequence or a reward.

And we are going to make that bad behavior that we don't like, go away. And we do that instead of maybe focusing on what was causing the behavior in the first place. So what does this look like? Sometimes this looks like timeouts. We send them to go be on their own for a little bit to have time to maybe calm down. Or sometimes we say, "Stop or else." And then insert your consequence. Maybe you're not going to get any ice cream or you're not going to get your screen time today.

So what message are we giving our children when we're behavior fixing? We tell them, "Your emotion is embarrassing. It is not safe. It is too much for me to handle." And when we're doing behavior fixing it can actually work and this is why we see it in so much of the parenting advice that we're given. And the reason that behavior fixing works is that children need secure attachment with their adult. It is literally wired into their survival instinct because they need a parent or an adult for their survival.

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And so if their emotion is making them not safe with you they are going to try to stop it. Or if their behavior is a problem and it's going to keep you from being okay with them, if that's what they're feeling from your response. Then they're going to stop that behavior. And so that's why behavior fixing can work to stop a bad behavior. But it doesn't actually address the cause of the behavior and it does have very negative side-effects in that it's teaching children to turn off their emotions, to not have them or that their emotions aren't safe. And it does not teach them how to regulate their emotions.

Another way that we often try to fix emotions when our children are struggling is using logic. And we'll say, "Oh my word, you don't need to be sad about that." Or, "This is not something to be upset over." And what is our child hearing when we respond in this way? They're hearing, my emotions are not valid. I can't trust myself. I must be wrong about what I'm feeling. And this is dangerous because we want children to trust their feelings. We want them to trust their emotions.

Here's the problem, logic, when we're using it, we're speaking of the logic of an adult. We're speaking of the logic of being in our body that's the adult body and having the response that we're having to whatever they're responding to. And what they're in is their child, a child body and their child brain. And so their response is different than ours. And we're telling them that their response isn't valid or that their feeling isn't valid. And that's scary because we want kids to trust themselves.

We want them to listen to how they feel and trust their emotions. We also want them to feel confident that they can handle their emotions no matter how big they are. And to not feel shame over feeling and having an emotional response to things. I heard an interesting definition of emotional agility or grit recently. And it wasn't that we just keep going when things are hard. It was that we can handle whatever emotions come our way, no matter how big they are.

And I loved that definition because we don't know exactly what emotions our children are going to run into. But we want them to feel confident in their ability to handle them whatever they are. So if we're not going to do behavior fixing and we're not going to use logic, meaning adult logic then what can we do? I'm

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going to give you five things to try that can really, really help when children are having big emotions.

First, remember that you're a good parent even if your child isn't happy all the time. I think we feel this pressure that if we're a good parent, our kids are going to be happy and that's actually not true. A healthy child is going to have a lot of positive and a lot of negative emotions. That's healthy, we want them to do that. And if we're not stressing over the fact that our child's having negative emotions, we can handle it and it's okay. Then the child can see that it's okay for them to have big emotions.

My second one is instead of sending kids to timeout, sit with them. I love Brené Brown calls it sitting with your children in the dark. And instead of sending them off to be alone, where we are kind of sending a message of when you're having big emotions you're going to have to be alone. And that again triggers that abandonment thing where they think, okay, I can't have big emotions or I will be abandoned by my parents. So instead we sit with them. We go with them to wherever their safe quiet place is and we sit with them.

And help them feel like they are supported, and cared about, and allowed to have big feelings. We don't have to fix it. We're probably not able to fix it immediately. We're just going to sit with them and make sure they feel safe and loved while they're feeling.

And I actually really like to pair this one with number three which is using language to help your child feel heard and believed. And so you can say something like, "It's hard not to get something you want. That feels so awful." And maybe they're really, really upset and throwing a tantrum because they got the red cup instead of the blue cup. And in our adult place of logic we're thinking this is ridiculous. Why are they upset about this? But in a child's brain we're saying, "It feels so hard to really want something and not get the thing you want."

We can relate to that. That's a true emotion. It's going to look different when they're older, but we can model for them when they're younger how to just listen to that feeling and acknowledge that it's hard. We can say something like, "It's

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so frustrating when things don't feel fair." And maybe they're upset because of a turn and someone else has had the toy longer than they have or has had an extra turn on the swing. And we can say, "It is so hard when things don't feel fair."

And we're teaching them that it's okay to feel frustrated when things don't feel fair. And as adults we feel this too. And we're modelling for them how to acknowledge that emotion, and to feel it and sit with it. There's another phrase I love from Dr. Becky Kennedy, she says, "To say you are the only one in your body." And we're teaching them, you are the only one that knows how you feel right now. I don't get to tell you what you feel or if what you're feeling is reasonable or not. You're the only one in your body right now.

And when we say this to our children we're teaching them to believe their feelings and trust themselves. Now, this doesn't mean that we're doing permissive parenting and we're just giving them whatever they want. We still have boundaries. If we say, "Hey, we're done", at the park, "It's time to go", and our child throws a tantrum, it doesn't mean that we don't say, "It's still time to go." But we sit with them and acknowledge that that feeling is real, that you are so upset that you have to leave right now and that you don't get to do the thing you want to do, that's so frustrating.

And we acknowledge that they feel that way and you are allowed to feel that way. We still have to go and I know that's hard and you're allowed to be upset and you're allowed to be angry and we are still going to go. And so it's not permissive parenting but we are allowing and validating their emotion.

Tip number four is something I have done with my children for a long time and that is naming the emotion. What are we feeling? Or sometimes with my young, young kids, if they're preschoolers we'll try making the face. And we'll practice it when we're not in the emotion, so just for fun outside of when we're actually feeling big feelings. And we'll say, "What does your mad face look like?" And they make a face. "What does your sad face look like? What does your scared face look like." And we practice different emotions.

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Then when we're in those moments of big emotion they have a better chance of being able to name and identify what it is that they're feeling. And when you can name it, it actually gives you a little bit of distance from it. It allows you to see it instead of just be in it. Another thing you can try that sometimes can be even more effective, especially with small children is how big is the emotion? So instead of having to name the emotion they can talk about how big it feels. This emotion feels as big as two dinosaurs.

And sometimes just being able to feel and tell you how big it feels is even more relieving to them than being able to name the emotion. It also helps them as they're going into another big emotion later, they can remember that they already felt an emotion and got through one that was so big. And they can say, "This one feels even bigger than that." Or maybe it feels about the same or maybe less. But they know that they've already survived one of those really big, as big as two dinosaur emotions and they can make it through another one.

The fifth suggestion is one of my favorites and it is connection time. And this is something that we're doing when our child is not in a big emotion. If you can imagine your child having a little piggybank, and you're putting time into it, connection time and then you're kind of pulling out of it, when you're asking them to do something that they don't want to do or helping them work through something hard. And they're taking out of that bank during those times. And so we have to make sure that that bank is full enough that there's something to take out when they need it.

One of my favorite quotes from Dr. Becky's book, *Good Inside*, she says, "Connection always increases cooperation." If we want our kids to cooperate with us, the more connection we have with them the better that's going to go. So what does good connection time look like? The good news is it's actually pretty easy. Children are wired to want to be connected with you. I like to recommend small little segments of time, maybe 10 minutes, 15 minutes at a time. It can have a massive impact on your connection with your child. So what are some of the things to do during this time? Play.

Play is going to be one of the number one things. Let them choose the activity and dictate the play. They may want to play a board game and go backwards or

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have a tea party with their stuffed animals and it's okay. You can do what they want to do and let them dictate that play. Another one of my favorite ways to build connection time is reading together. Reading to your children is very, very good for their brain development. It helps their language and builds their knowledge base which is critically important in those early years. But it's also a time to bond with you and have conversation.

And the third thing is spending time just talking or cuddling with them. I like to do talking time in the car, maybe turn down the radio or the podcast, whatever you're listening to for a minute or two and listen to your child and let them talk. If you have a small child it is inevitable that there are going to be moments where they have really big emotions.

And hopefully this helps you to kind of think through what to do and instead of maybe going to that natural instinct we have to behavior fix, or what we've been taught to do from the parenting experts that we've heard in the past. Try some of these other things, these five options that you can start working on even before those behaviors are happening, before the big emotions are happening, and then when they're happening. And you can help your child start learning to have confidence and trusting their emotions as well as being able to regulate and handle them no matter how big they are.

Thank you so much for spending some time with me today and listening to this episode of the Raising Healthy Kid Brains podcast. We are a brand new podcast which means we are harder to find than the perfect LEGO in a big box full of LEGO. And we need your help so that we can reach more moms, and parents, and teachers with this information about their children's brains. So how can you help? You can follow this podcast wherever you listen to podcasts and leave us a rating and a review. That would mean the absolute world to us.

And hey, we want to make it fun because at Planning Playtime we are all about fun. We made a very special gift for you and your kiddo. And your follows, ratings and reviews are going to unlock different parts of that gift over the next few weeks. It's going to be so much fun so after you follow, rate and review the podcast, head over to planningplaytime.com/podcastlaunch to find out where we are and how much of that gift you can go and get for your child right now.

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Thanks a million and I will see you on the next episode of the Raising Healthy Kid Brains podcast.