

## A Parent's Greatest Gift: Self-Management

When your child faces their toughest life moment and you aren't there to save them, they can have the self-management skills to regain focus, respond constructively, and bring their best self to the table. This could be the greatest gift you give your child!

The ability to manage their most intense emotions and maintain focus can be challenging for even the most studious and intellectual children (and adults). Perhaps, they are in the midst of an important test or on the playground they get stopped in their tracks unable to respond to a classmate's cruel words at recess. Or, maybe at home, your child shuts down, slams their door, and refuses to come out to attend a family-obligated event. The inability to focus on a test, respond to a bully on the playground, or constructively communicate about an undesirable event is evidence of what is happening in a child's brain -- indeed anyone's brain -- when they are highly emotional. Daniel Goleman, author of the bestseller, *Emotional Intelligence*, called it "emotional hijacking." The primal or survival part of the brain, called the amygdala, takes over thinking in those heated moments. In these moments your child does not have access to the language, logic, and creativity that reside in the higher regions of the brain that might help them think of a clever response or solution. This also happens when a parent or someone in a parenting role is yelling at or punishing a child and that child is upset, frightened, or awash with shame -- they are unable to think about any lessons trying to be relayed. Instead their focus is on fight, flight, or freeze.

What restores higher-level thinking when they are upset and this mental hijacking occurs? How do we as parents help our children prepare to respond so that they don't get harmed in the toughest of moments? The answer lies in the skill of self-management. And, self-management can engage a host of other important social and emotional skills like impulse control, feelings identification, empathy for others, and responsible decision making. If we work with our children on multiple ways to calm down in a variety of settings, then they can respond to problems safely and constructively. They can return to learning, playing, and cooperating with family more quickly and competently.

### 0-5-Year-Olds: **Teach the language of feelings.**

“Use your words,” is a popular request parents demand of their young frustrated children. But, what words? Children this age have not learned the words to express the whole-body takeover that happens when they are angry or frustrated. When you see your child is emotional, offer them language. “Seems like you are feeling disappointed. Is that right?” Simply attempting to understand their feelings can release some of their built-up tension and help them become more adept at seeking understanding from those around them.

### 6-7-Year-Olds: **Promote self-discipline.**

Children this age are learning the rules of school and family life, which sometimes involve testing and understanding the boundary lines when breaking rules. Parents can easily be baited into power struggles. As parents, modeling our own self-management skills is key. As we model our skills, we can enjoy the multiplier effect of improving our skills while influencing our child’s. When calm, offer limited but authentic choices to give your child a sense of control in the situation.

### 8-10-Year-Olds: **Practice upstander skills.**

Most children want to take action when they see injustice, but they need to know what to say and do. For example, help a child prepare for what to say and do if a classmate says mean words or uses harmful actions against them or another. Your child may feel dumbstruck (frozen amygdala) when someone on the playground says, “We don’t want to play with you.” But, if you have practiced some ways to assert themselves without harming others, they will be ready to self-manage with competence.

## 11-14-Year-Olds: **Brainstorm healthy ways to handle stress.**

Children this age have mounting pressure in every aspect of their lives as they tackle rigorous academics, compete in sports, attempt to fit in, and find and keep friends. In addition to increasing social and academic expectations, they are also in the midst of the awkwardness of puberty. Helping your child develop coping strategies to manage stress will serve them through high school, college, and beyond. Brainstorm together making a list of options that can be posted and referred to later. “Can you take a brain break and take a walk outside away from your frustrating homework? Can you breathe in the fresh air and spend a little time outdoors?” This also begins a trusting dialogue where you acknowledge that stress is normal and expected, so when your teen is feeling stressed, they can confide in you.

Find more about developing self-management at [ParentingMontana.org](https://www.ParentingMontana.org).

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