

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

**"My teacher wants you to sign my test," my son said as he placed a paper quickly on the table nowhere near where I was sitting and walked out of the room. My curiosity rose. Clearly, he was not eager to show it to me. Glancing at the content, it was immediately recognizable - the science test for which he had genuinely studied. But it appeared as if he hadn't cracked his book. How was this possible?**

I asked what happened. And I began to understand when he said "Mom, it was 'bring-your-pet-to-school' day." My son is allergic to all animals furry. It's an intense allergy that often ushers in a two-week sickness with wheezing and misery. Yet, and perhaps not surprisingly, there's nothing my son loves more than animals. So, on "bring-your-pet-to-school" day, it's a painful reminder of his heartache over not having a dog or a cat. He came home that day and ran straight to his room - upset. It's no wonder that a test he was well prepared to take resulted in failure. He couldn't focus. The acute sadness about his unique position among his classmates - that he remained pet-less - took over his ability to think.

The ability to manage our most intense emotions can challenge even the most studious child making it impossible to focus. Children are faced with this issue not only in the midst of an important test but even on the playground when they are stopped in their tracks unable to respond after a classmate taunts them with cruel words like "No one likes you!" Or, at home, our child may melt down, shut her door, and refuse to come out when we need her to attend a family-obligated event.

This inability to focus on a test, to respond to a bully on the playground, or to 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 center of your brain called the amygdala - takes over thinking in those heated moments. If a tiger were hunting your daughter in the woods, it would serve to protect her as she focused only on fighting, fleeing, or freezing. But there are times when that fight, flight, or freeze focus does not help. Because in that moment, your child does not have access to the language, logic, and creativity that reside in the higher regions of the brain that

might help her think of a clever response or solution. So too if a parent is yelling at or punishing a child and the child is upset, frightened, or awash with shame, they are unable to think about any lessons you might want to teach. Instead, their focus is on fight, flight, or freeze.

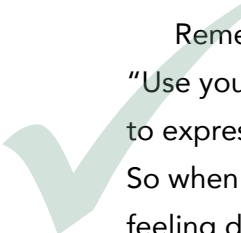
So then, what restores higher level thinking skills when upset? Your child's deep, slowed breath is like the whistle blowing at recess time. There was a chaotic mess of running, playing children (read: your internal upset mess) and when that whistle sounds, all children quietly move toward lining up. Deep breathing is that signaling function for your body. The message it sends is, "All clear. Return to normal functioning."

Considering the fact that this mental hijacking occurs, how can you prepare your child to respond so that s/he doesn't get harmed or harm others in those toughest moments? The answer lies in cultivating 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. In doing so, they can also more quickly return to learning, return to play, or return to cooperating with family plans while feeling more competent in the process.

Check out the following ideas for how parents can best promote the invaluable skill of self-management at various ages and stages.

## Ages 3-5

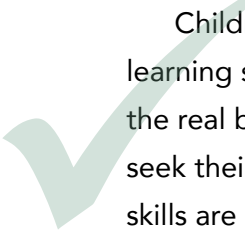
### **Teach the Language of Feelings**



Remember when it was popular for parents and teachers to say to an upset child, "Use your words"? But what words? Children, ages 3-5, have not learned the words to express the whole body takeover that happens when they are angry or frustrated. So when you see your child is emotional, offer her language. "Seems like you're feeling disappointed. Is that right?" The simple act of attempting to understand her feelings can release some of her built-up tension. As she becomes more adept at seeking understanding from those around her, she'll grow in her ability to manage her upset effectively.

## Ages 6-7

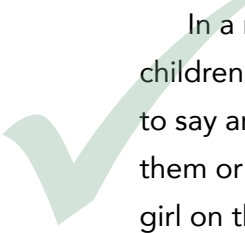
### **Promote Self-Discipline**



Children, ages 6-7, are learning the rules of family and school life. And that learning sometimes involves testing or even breaking the rules to understand where the real boundaries lie. Parents can easily be baited into power struggles when they seek their child's cooperation and he refuses. Using your own self-management skills are key. As you model, you'll enjoy the multiplier effect improving your skills and your child's. The person who is the most emotionally attached to a particular outcome has the least power. So first, if you are frustrated by your child who has just refused to get his shoes on, stop, breathe, and calm down first. Consider that any nagging you engage in could make you later and less successful. When calm, offer a limited but authentic choice. This gives your child a sense of control in a situation where he is attempting to gain power inappropriately. "Would you like to wear your red sneakers or your blue sandals? Either are fine." Then, move on with your preparations with the expectation that he will do it.

## Ages 8-10

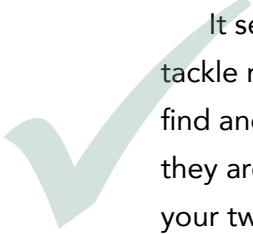
### **Practice Upstander Skills**



In a recent survey of U.S. kids by Highlights for Children, they found most children want to take action when they see an injustice. But, they need to know what to say and do when a classmate says mean words and uses harmful actions against them or another. Give your child some practice in what to say, for example, when a girl on the playground says "We don't want you in our game." Your child could be dumbstruck as her amygdala freezes her ability to respond. But if you practice (role playing with family members) some ways to assert herself without harming others like: "I want to play with classmates who want me to join their game," she'll be ready to self-manage with competence.

## Ages 11-14

### Brainstorm Healthy Ways to Handle Stress



It seems the pressure is on in every aspect of the tween and teen's life as they tackle rigorous academics, compete in extracurricular sports, attempt to fit in, and find and keep friends. In addition to the many social and academic expectations, they are also in the midst of all of the awkwardness that comes with puberty. Helping your tween or teen develop coping strategies to manage pressure will serve him through high school, college, and beyond. So, brainstorm together. "When you are feeling stress, what can you do?" Make a long list of options and post it somewhere you can refer to later. "Can you take a brain break and walk outside away from your frustrating homework? Can you smell the fresh air and spend a little time outdoors?" These may seem like simple ideas to you, but your teen needs options for calming down when the pressure is mounting. Instead of building up and leading to a volcanic explosion, your tween can manage his stress along the way. This also begins a trusting dialogue in which you acknowledge stress is normal and expected so that when your teen is feeling the pressure, he may confide in you.

Self-management just may be one of the greatest tests of our family life. How do we not harm the ones we love when we feel angry, anxious, or hurt? In a recent, large survey of parents in the state of Montana,<sup>1</sup> for example, many said they struggled with losing their temper and saying something to their child they later regretted. Those situations need not occur if parents have thought through what they'll do in those "lose it" moments. How can we calm down to regain our brain's full capacity? What will we say like "Mom needs a minute"? Where will we go? Will we walk outside and breathe in the fresh air? Let your family know your plan for dealing with upset in advance so that when you take a moment, they know that you are self-managing.

This is what it means to parent with social and emotional development. Imagine if you used self-management skills throughout your child's developing years. When your child faced her toughest life moment and you weren't there to save her, she'd have internalized the skill of self-management to regain focus, to respond constructively, and to bring her best. There may not be any greater gift a parent could give a child.

## About The Author:

Jennifer Miller, M.Ed., author of the popular site, Confident Parents, Confident Kids, has twenty years of experience helping adults become more effective with the children they love through social and emotional learning. Among other roles, she serves as lead writer for ParentingMontana.org, a project that provides easy to use parenting tools to support a child's success from kindergarten through the teen years.

## References

1. Center for Health and Safety Culture. (2018). *2017 Montana Parent Survey Key Findings Report*, Bozeman, MT: Montana State University.

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