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3 year old cries a lot

Children have this way of crying that is utterly heartbreaking. Watching their face crumple and tears flow from their eyes over a sibling taking their toy can be enough to get our own tears flowing. On the other hand, if your child cries at the drop of a hat and you are dealing with small-person-crisis after crisis, comforting your upset child can be an exhausting process. To figure out what makes kids cry so much, we can look at the science behind crying, which explains A LOT. The system that controls crying is divided into two parts: the sympathetic, which produces aggressive responses, and the parasympathetic, which helps process emotions and work towards calming down. For example, if your child wants a biscuit and you say 'no', a tantrum may swiftly follow – this would be your child's sympathetic system in force. But as the tantrum dissolves into sobbing, your child's parasympathetic system would then be activated. In other words, once your child is crying in this way, their brain has shifted from 'pursuit' to 'sadness'. Read more about challenging behaviour here: Crying can be positive This is good news. It means that your child's tears have a purpose, other than 'manipulation' or bad behaviour. So even though your child might initially protest in anger over something, the tears that follow are a sign she is moving towards acceptance of this and needs some support in doing so. Research has also indicated that human tears contain a stress hormone, which means that shedding tears can help your child feel better. In fact, most people who cry report feeling better after having a good cry, suggesting that it does ease tension and a build-up of emotion. We need to be okay with the crying It's not easy for us parents to be with our children when they cry, but this is exactly what kids need when they're processing emotions, especially big ones like anger and disappointment. Sure, it might be over the TV show they're not allowed to watch, or because they really don't want to tidy up their toys. Although the problems might seem meaningless to us, for a child, a problem of any size is significant and if we are to help them move on, we need to understand their world and appreciate their experiences. Reasons kids cry Helping your child reduce crying isn't so much about discouraging them from crying but about working on the triggers that cause the crying, and often these are quite easy to control, once you spot them. Here are some common triggers for crying in children: Stress Kids get stressed, just like adults. Events like hospitalisation and trauma are obvious examples. However, there are everyday ones too, like moving house, transitioning to a new sibling, family conflict, starting school, parental separation, or getting used to new partners (step-parents). Even a day at preschool is likely to contain a series of events that build-up stress in your little person: a lost toy, missing out on their turn in a game, or a friend not being kind to them are all likely to lead to stress. Tired Tired children are going to be more prone to collapsing in tears over anything and everything. Try to ensure your child gets enough sleep by sticking to a bedtime and keeping nap times sacred. Hunger Hangry, anyone? If your child seems to be overly tearful, think about how long it's been since she's eaten. A snack could help tide her over to the next meal and stop any hunger-driven meltdowns. Wants something Kids find it hard getting a 'no' response to a request that seems perfectly legitimate to them. Stick to your guns on whatever you've said, but help your child understand your reasoning and tell them you understand why they're so upset. Even though it can feel like it's easier to give in to your child for the sake of peace, hang in there – just like a wave, it will peak and then pass, with your child moving on soon enough. Looking for attention If your child seems to want your attention for some reason (and has chosen to cry to do that), have a think about how busy your week has been, and whether your child might need some connection time with you. Kids aren't mature enough to stop and think, 'Wow, I haven't had quality time with mum for ages, which is making me feel a little insecure. I need some cuddle time and focused attention. I'll tell her that now.' Ha! If only. More likely it's that your child will follow you around on your busiest morning whinging at anything until you're at breaking point. See what happens if you stop and focus on them for a few minutes. Some reconnection with you can fill their emotional cup and send them happily on their way. Understanding your child's crying behaviour Some children are more prone to crying than others, just as some adults are. If your child is wired that way, you might just have to kick along with it. By being aware of what your child is going through, you can limit how much the triggers listed above affect your child. If it helps, try to remember that your child's crying is a process of healing whatever's going on for them. Your job here isn't to stop the tears from flowing but to create a safe space to help your child set them free. And there's light at the end of the tunnel in all this: as your child grows their ability to process their own emotions is going to be well-honed, thanks to your support. This has great implications for how they deal with big feelings as a teenage and connect with other people to form meaningful relationships. So even though your child's crying behaviour can be challenging to take now, remember that your emotional investment in all of this is likely to pay off well in the future. As a parent, you deal with a LOT of feelings on a daily basis. Right? And sometimes, it can all get to be just a little bit much! When you've had what seems like hours of multiple people crying at you, the temptation to make it stop is high! We've all said it, or at least thought it. 'Stop crying! Just stop!' Or maybe you heard it as a child? "Don't be silly" "Shh, everyone is looking at you" "Stop that noise, right now!" "Stop crying or I'll give you something to cry about!" But what if I told you that every time you dismiss or minimise your child's feelings, you actually make your job harder. You very rarely succeed at making them stop anyway, and it's more likely that they will need more support from you in the future rather than less. If you don't hear the message they are trying to send you, the messenger just gets louder and louder until you do. Children are looking for empathy and understanding. If they don't get it, they'll keep trying. Crying is ok. It's a very healthy and necessary way for children to express their feelings, and we don't need to make them stop. By telling them to 'stop crying' we send the message that their feelings are not important, not valid, silly, and annoying. If we want our children to learn how to regulate their emotions, and to trust us with their problems and feelings, then we cannot be dismissive of them when they try to do this! Crying is always appropriate. Whatever your child is upset about is valid. It might seem trivial to you, but a child does not have an adult perspective on the world. Oftentimes people struggle most with allowing children to express their feelings in public, thinking that it is not an appropriate setting and worrying about other's reactions or judgement. But let's not teach them they need to quiet their feelings for others. They will eventually learn our unspoken social rules. One day they will know how to deal with their feelings and express them at times that adults consider 'appropriate', but the way we support the development of emotional regulation is by empathy and understanding, not silencing. "Listen earnestly to anything your children want to tell you, no matter what. If you don't listen eagerly to the little stuff when they are little, they won't tell you the big stuff when they are big, because to them all of it has always been big stuff." — Catherine M. Wallace 10 Things to Say Instead of 'Stop Crying' Sometimes, even when you know that you shouldn't tell your child to stop crying, it's hard to know what to say instead! You might feel like you need to do something, but aren't sure exactly what. As a child if you were often required to silence your feelings for others, these situations can be incredibly uncomfortable. Having grown accustomed to pushing your own feelings aside, the experience of a child fully expressing their sadness, anger, disappointment, or any other negative emotion can be quite triggering. The good news is, practice makes perfect, and it can actually be quite healing for yourself to be able to support your child through their own emotions. So, what can you say? Here's some suggestions! You could also just say nothing! Sometimes no words are needed and physical comfort or presence is enough. What NOT to do When Your Child is Crying Don't distract. When you distract your child from their feelings, you miss a chance to connect and help them learn the emotional regulation skills they will need in the future. You also send the message that their feelings are unimportant, or too much for you to handle. Children need to know that you are capable of dealing with their emotions so that they feel safe and capable too. It's also a pretty disrespectful way to respond. Imagine opening up to a friend or partner only for them to say 'ooh but look at my new puppy!' or something totally irrelevant. You would likely feel shut down, disrespected, embarrassed, and be unlikely to confide in them in the future. Don't punish. Punishment and rewards are not a part of respectful parenting. Never punish, threaten, shame, blame, or judge a child for their feelings! No but's. When you're empathising with your child's feelings, refrain from following it up with a 'but'. E.g. "You're sad because you really wanted another piece of cake, but you can't have one". 'But' kind of invalidates everything that comes before it. It tries to explain away or fix the feelings. There's no need to do that. Empathising is enough. Ask too many questions. When your child is full of huge overwhelming feelings, they don't have the ability to provide answers to lots of questions. Empathise first, ask questions later. Say 'it's ok'. People are well meaning when they say 'it's ok', 'you're fine', 'shh', but the thing is, your child is not fine right now. They don't feel fine, so even though you're trying to be reassuring, it can come across as minimising their feelings. A simple 'it's ok to cry' is a better option. Have a time limit. Don't use empathy as a technique to ultimately stop the crying. That's not the goal! The aim is to help your child feel heard, understood, validated, and supported. That might take a while, especially if their feelings have been dismissed in the past. There might be a lot to get out! Don't try empathy for 5 minutes and then declare it 'doesn't work' because your child is still crying. Empathy is not a technique for control, but a way of meeting your child where they are and supporting them. Next time your child is struggling with an overwhelming feeling, have some of the above phrases memorised and meet them with empathy and understanding. Because they deserve it. Feelings aren't something to be avoided, but opportunities for connection. If you've ever tried to help a crying kid calm down, this might sound familiar to you. My 4 year old stands there bawling in the middle of his room. All I did was ask him to put away the Duplo bricks that have been haphazardly strewn all across his room, and he loses it. "Kiddo, I don't understand why you're so upset, can you tell me why you're so sad?" He looks at me and bawls harder. I drop to my knees and pull him into a big hug and say "Hey buddy, it won't take too long to put away the Duplos…" his loud cries interrupt me. I start to get frustrated. All I want him to do is put away the random bricks laying around the room, it's not that big of a deal. To me at least. Impatiently, I hold my boy a little longer and ask him again to tell me why he's crying. Between the hiccups and wails, I hear him say something about his inventions. Then it clicks. This post contains affiliate links I look around the room and see them. His inventions. My boy has spent all week long building inventions out of Duplos. He spends hours getting them just right and even more hours playing with each and every one. It's all he's played with for days. And here I am, asking him to put away his Duplo. Of course, he's upset. But there's been a miscommunication problem here. I wasn't asking him to take apart his inventions. I was just asking that he put away all the extra bricks that weren't being played with. So I try to tell him that he gets to keep his inventions. More crying. I ask him to only put away the extra bricks that aren't being used. Even more crying. I try reflecting his feelings. "Oh honey, you're so upset. You don't want to clean up your Duplo." Now he's wailing. This kid is so upset that he can't hear me. His brain is being so flooded with emotion that he literally can't think straight. He can't calm down enough to understand what I'm trying to tell him. He needs to calm down. So, I think back to my days as a therapist and I pull out my #1 favorite calm down tip for kids. I put my hands on his shoulders so that we're face to face. I whisper to him "Hey buddy, do you want to play a little game really quick? It will be fun." His tear-filled blue eyes look up at me and he nods. "Okay, it's super simple. Can you point out 5 things that are blue?" He hiccups in sorrow but looks around the room. Slowly he walks over to his Duplo bin and says "this is blue….one." He continues walking through his room pointing out all the blue things. His cries stop and he starts smiling as he goes. "Two blue, three blue, four blue, five blue! I got 5 blue things, Mama!" "Awesome job kiddo. Now can you find 4 yellow things?" With a huge smile on his face, he does it again. When he's done, I ask him to sit in my lap. I explain to him that I know how important his inventions are and that he can keep them out as long as he'd like to. Together, we find the perfect place for them to go. Then I ask him to look around and to put away any Duplo bricks that aren't being used and starts to clean. That room is picked up in mere minutes. Seems like magic huh? The trick is knowing how the emotional brain works. When we get upset, our brains are functioning in it's more primitive brain or the limbic system. This part of the brain controls our emotions. This happens in adults and children alike. But, the adult brain is fully developed (if you're over 25 that is). So, we can control our emotional brain a little better than kids can. When our brain is functioning in the limbic system, it has a harder time functioning in its upper brain where logic takes place. Literally, we're so emotional that we can't think straight. One quick hack to get people, including kids, to calm down is to get them thinking. This moves brain functioning from the emotional brain to the logical brain. Whenever you notice that your child is overwhelmed… Get their attention first by doing something unexpected. Turn on and off the lights, get really excited and jump up and down, whisper so that they have to lean in to hear you. Ask them to play a quick game and challenge them to… Name 5 things that are blue Tell me 3 things you hear right now What's 2+2? (ask based on their ability) What are 3 things you can touch right now Keep it simple but get them thinking. Related Book: The Whole Brain Child It's frustrating when a child melts down and becomes illogical. You want your child to listen and to do what's asked of them. But an upset child will never be able to pick up those Duplos… So, help your kid calm down so that they can do what's asked of them. It's a win-win for both you and your child. Psst: This brain game works well for frustrated Moms too If you're looking for more tips on how to stay calm…and get your kids to listen to you, check out my free workshop below.

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