

## Parent Resource

Title : Managing Your Own Emotions:  
The Key to Positive, Effective  
Parenting



Managing Your Own Emotions: The Key to Positive, Effective Parenting  
By Claire Lerner

Research shows that when parents react harshly and with emotional intensity, children's distress tends to escalate, and the problem is less likely to get resolved. Here are some strategies that can help. Wander any playground or mall, and at some point you are likely to observe a parent coaching her child to take deep breaths in and out to calm herself, or directing her to "use her words" versus hitting, kicking, or grabbing.

These are indeed good parenting strategies for helping children learn to manage and express their emotions in healthy ways—a critical but not easy task—that I addressed in a previous article, which resulted in many comments by parents to the tune of: “It’s managing our own emotions that’s the big problem.” Indeed, this has been my own greatest parenting challenge, as it has been for the hundreds of parents I have worked with. I am solidly convinced after 30 years of practice that the single most important skill for “positive” parenting over the course of our kids’ lifetimes is our own self-awareness and self-regulation as parents.

Parenting young children (really, children of any age) is an intensely emotional experience. There is the pure pleasure of cuddling, playing, laughing, exploring, and delighting in your baby’s daily growth and discoveries. And then there are the challenges—the moments of stress, anger, frustration, and resentment—at not knowing what a baby’s cry means and how to calm her, at the totally irrational demands of a toddler, or at the aggressive behavior of an older child toward a new baby. These experiences naturally evoke strong feelings that can be hard to handle. But most of the behaviors that we find maddening are a natural part of growing up and are not intended to be malicious; they are a child’s effort to cope with a difficult feeling or situation. Children need our assistance, not our anger.

So it is important to tune in to and manage our feelings, because how we react in these moments deeply affects our children’s ability for self-regulation, self-control, and overall emotional health far into the future. Research (and real life) shows that when parents react harshly and with emotional intensity, children’s distress tends to escalate and, whatever the problem at hand, it is less likely to get resolved.



Here are some strategies that can help:

Tune in to your feelings.

Feelings are not right or wrong—they just are. It's what we do with them that can be helpful or hurtful. When you get out of the business of judging your feelings, you can be more open to looking at and owning them—the first step in controlling and expressing feelings in useful ways. One dad so eloquently summed it up, going straight to the heart of the issue: "It's important to learn to recognize your own triggers. It's not fair to expect your children to deal with your baggage."

We're all human. It is the rare parent who wouldn't be consumed with embarrassment, quickly followed by anger and resentment at a child, when, for example, at some family event she throws a fit for not getting the first piece of cake, while her adorable cousin is delighting everyone by helping to hand out the slices and taking the last one, so unselfishly, for herself.

Tuning in to your feelings allows you to make a conscious decision—instead of a knee-jerk reaction—about how best to respond. In this case, it might mean taking some deep breaths to clear your head, then calmly telling your child that you know she is disappointed, but it's not possible to always go first and that she will be okay—communicating confidence in her ability to cope. Although remaining calm is hard work, the benefits are far-reaching and the payoffs extend far into the future. Remaining calm allows you to stay connected with your child rather than increasing her distress by experiencing an emotional break with you; she feels understood, not shamed, which makes her more open to accepting the limit being set; and when you react calmly, it decreases the stress hormone in her own brain, which helps her calm more quickly. Staying calm also results in a lot less remorse for having lost control, and many fewer nights going to bed feeling like all you did that day was yell and stress on your kids—a common and painful experience for many parents.

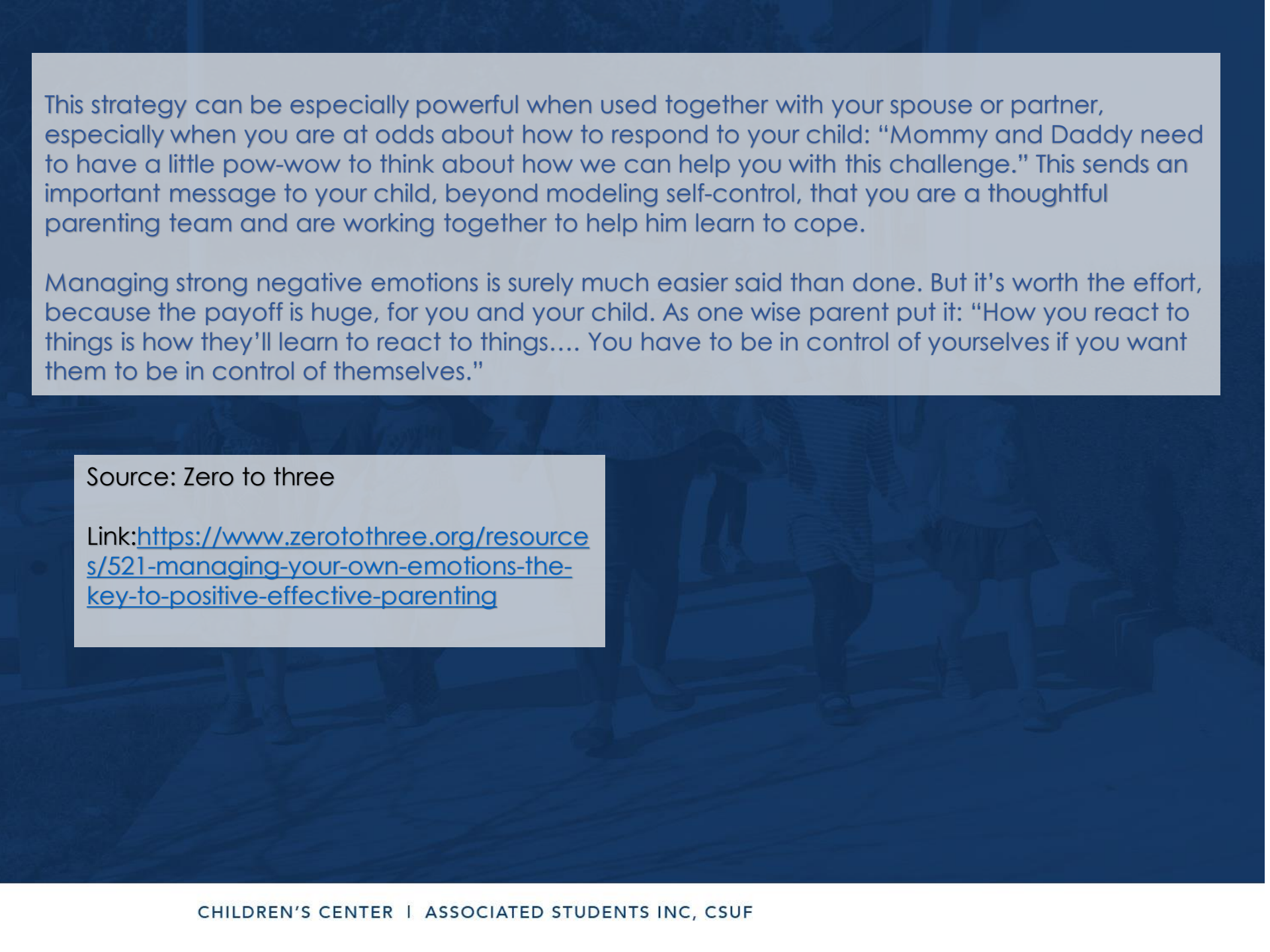
Do the unexpected.

When every bone in your body is moving toward explosion at some outrageous demand or provocative behavior, it can be very effective for your child (and you!) to give her a big bear hug or do something silly. This can reduce the stress and tension of the situation, and doing something totally unexpected can also put a stop to the unwanted behavior. This is not coddling or giving in. If your child is telling you he hates you because you won't let him have 5 more minutes to play (and he hasn't finished his game yet!—he just needs 5 MORE MINUTES!) and you approach him with a bear hug while saying, “It looks like you need a big mommy hug,” you are letting him know you hear his frustration and empathize with it. You are not giving him five more minutes—which would be “coddling” or rescuing him from having to cope with a limit he doesn't like. It may surprise you how this can turn the tides—doing the opposite of what he expects when he is in provocative mode. Or, don't respond to his “bait” and just turn on some music and start to do a silly dance, all the way to the dinner table you are trying to transition him to. Simply say, “Join me,” and move along. It may sound hokey, but it can be very effective—and again relieve both his stress and yours.

Give yourself a time-out.

When you are having a hard time remaining calm in the presence of your child, be sure your child is safe (which might mean putting him in a pack 'n' play for a few minutes) and give yourself a minute or two to cool down. You might say: “Mommy needs some time to think about how I can best help you.” This can be a very powerful strategy in that it throws a monkey wrench into the process, which can sometimes halt the child in his tracks. And it allows you to remain present even in the face of the negative emotional intensity these situations often arouse. It also serves as very powerful role-modeling for your child about how to manage strong emotions—exactly what you are trying to teach. This gets you out of a reactive state and gives you time to think about the meaning of your child's behavior and what you want him to learn from the experience. It's much more likely you will come up with a response that sets the limit or guides your child's behavior while remaining nurturing.



A blue-tinted background image showing the lower legs and feet of several children walking on a sidewalk. The children are in motion, and their shadows are cast on the ground.

This strategy can be especially powerful when used together with your spouse or partner, especially when you are at odds about how to respond to your child: “Mommy and Daddy need to have a little pow-wow to think about how we can help you with this challenge.” This sends an important message to your child, beyond modeling self-control, that you are a thoughtful parenting team and are working together to help him learn to cope.

Managing strong negative emotions is surely much easier said than done. But it’s worth the effort, because the payoff is huge, for you and your child. As one wise parent put it: “How you react to things is how they’ll learn to react to things.... You have to be in control of yourselves if you want them to be in control of themselves.”

Source: Zero to three

Link:<https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/521-managing-your-own-emotions-the-key-to-positive-effective-parenting>