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How to be a calm parent when you're stressed

Being a parent can be testing. When you're sleep deprived, it's difficult to balance your own needs with those of a child who won't eat their breakfast or get ready for school. Even the most laid back Mums and Dads can feel their stress levels rising – so how can you help yourself to stay calm during trying times?

Why staying calm benefits parents and children

Staying calm can be easier said than done. Everyone gets angry sometimes and it's only natural for your frustrations to boil over, especially if you're juggling childcare responsibilities with work. However, staying cool has many benefits.

Firstly, it demonstrates to your child that you may be angry yet you still remain within your 'window of tolerance' – a space where you can manage your emotions, says [Counselling Directory member Claire Elmes](#).

"This teaches kids to safely navigate intense emotions," Elmes explains. "When we aren't calm as parents, we aren't reasonable, and we might frequently join them in what feels like a game of emotional tennis. We go backwards and forwards, resulting in even more rage and not being in control of our emotions."

Getting angry also enables transference to occur, which is where our emotional states are passed on to those around us¹. Children are perceptive and pick up on parents' emotions, even if they don't understand the context.

"Children are like sponges, soaking up our emotions. If we are calm, they are likely to be calmer," says Elmes.

When we get upset, it affects our ability to make rational decisions. This is because the part of the brain involved in emotional processing – the amygdala – responds to an event such as an argument and triggers a chain reaction that hinders our ability to think straight.

"Staying calm permits us to remain in our parasympathetic nervous system, which relaxes our body after period of stress and allows us to access the logical half of our brain," says Elmes. "When we are upset, we are in a state of fight, flight or freeze and are unable to think logically. It enables us to be empathic and figure out how to address the problem much faster."

If we manage to remain cool – or relatively cool – it helps to promote calmer behaviour in your children. "This is because your children will remember the incident and relate your calm response with a win-win situation, motivating them to behave better," says Elmes.

What to do when you are stressed

Different strategies work for different parents, but there are a number of ways to try and stay calm when things are demanding.

Take time away

If possible, it can help to give yourself a five-minute break. "Go and make a cup of tea or get a glass of water," says Elmes. "A quick visualisation can help when doing this. Create a happy, calm, special place you go to in your mind. Practise going there when you are not stressed initially and then take yourself there when you are [stressed](#)."

Check your breathing

Deep [breathing](#) can also help us to relax too. "Take some deep breaths from your stomach. This shifts us into our rest and recovery system and switches off the [stress](#) responses," says Elmes.

Think about why your child is acting a certain way

It's also important to remember that children don't think like adults because their brains are immature. Their ability to think, reason and regulate their emotions develops over time, meaning your child may still be harnessing these skills and abilities. It can be helpful to remember this if they're playing up².

"If your child is not in control of their emotions, stop trying to rationalise and engage in whatever is causing their distress," says Elmes. "They are not able to access logical thinking so you will be going around in circles or escalating arguments."

Make time for yourself

It's not easy to find time to relax when you're a parent. However, self-care is key to reducing overall stress, which will help you stay calm in [stressful](#) situations. This might mean going for a [coffee](#) on your own, meeting friends, going to an [exercise](#) class or reading a book in the bath without distractions. It can also help to pinpoint what is stressing you out so you can make changes. For example, if you frequently answer work emails after hours.

Further reading

1. [Won-Oak et al: What is the concept of parental 'emotional transference' to children? A Walker and Avant concept analysis.](#)
2. [Harvard University: Children's emotional development is built into the architecture of their brains.](#)

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Authored by: Lydia Smith	Peer Reviewed by: Dr Krishna Vakharia, MRCP	
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