Why Parenting Scripts Don't Work (and What to Try Instead)

Parenting scripts may not be the best way to tame tantrums.

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It seems that every parenting expert on the internet has a "script" for what to say when your child is having a tantrum or meltdown. Some parenting influencers even imply that if you say *exactly* the right words at the right time, your child's tantrum will magically be "tamed."

One of the most popular parenting accounts, "Big Little Feelings," suggests that parents use scripts like this: "You're frustrated because I won't let you eat the dog food. It's OK to feel frustrated." These influencers typically go on to claim that using scripts like this is "the first and most critical step toward decreasing the intensity and duration of tantrums" or something similar.

It seems too good to be true, right? With promises like this, you might find it hard to believe that most psychologists actually recommend using very few words—or none at all—

during a child's tantrum.

Why Do Our Words Not Help During Tantrums?

Research finds that using verbal explanation or reasoning in the heat of the moment doesn't really seem to work—meaning that it doesn't produce consistent or lasting change in behavior. A recent study also found that children tend to get *more* frustrated when parents label and empathize with their negative emotions.

Most parents seem to agree with this research, reporting that these scripts often fall flat when their child is in the middle of a meltdown. Psychologist Mona Delahoke notes on her website that she's polled hundreds of parents, and four out of five say that labeling emotions during a tantrum backfires and makes their child more upset.

If you've tried all the scripts for tantrums and they don't seem to work, you're not alone. Let's take a closer look at the research:

- When a child is upset, their executive functioning becomes impaired. (Translation: The part of the brain responsible for processing, remembering, and later applying your words isn't working effectively.) So even if you're saying something that your child would typically

understand when they are calm, they may not be able to do so when they are upset.

- Talking may encourage your child to respond to you verbally, which may escalate their frustration. Research suggests that talking about what is upsetting while a child is still distressed may not be an effective emotion regulation strategy.
- Not understanding or not being able to effectively express themselves may increase frustration. Research suggests that difficulties with language are linked to more frequent tantrums.
- Talking may be rewarding the very behaviors you would like to reduce. If your child is engaging in behaviors such as whining or trying to annoy you for the sake of gaining your attention, then talking to them during this behavior would be rewarding it—thus making it more likely that they engage in it again in the future.
- They may be experiencing sensory overwhelm. Research suggests that children with sensory sensitivities can have trouble processing language in an overwhelming environment. This means that your words, even kind and supportive words, may add to the overload rather than help soothe it.

So What Should You Do Instead?

1. Stay calm. The most important thing you can do is to stay as calm as possible. Your goal is for your child to mirror your calm and not escalate the tantrum in any way.

It is extremely normal to feel irritated by your child's behavior during a tantrum. If you feel this way, it is a great opportunity to model emotional regulation. Part of your healthy emotional regulation may involve walking away for a moment to calm yourself down.

Research finds that when parents are agitated but pretend to be calm, it may actually cause even more stress in kids and negatively impact the parent-child interaction. This means that if you are agitated, your kids are likely to sense your agitation, and any attempts at calming them down will not work. It's always better to get yourself to a more regulated place first.

2. Use nonverbal cues. Rather than using your words to calm down your child, nonverbal cues (facial expression, posture, gestures, or calming touch) may be more effective and less overwhelming.

3. Encourage children to use signs and gestures. Research finds that children may be more likely to use gestures than words during times of distress. Teach your child simple signs or gestures, such as the sign for "help me" or "more" or reaching out their hands when they want a hug.

4. Try the "one-up" rule. Many speech-language therapists and psychologists recommend sticking to phrases that are "one-up" from your child's current language level when they are upset. So, for example, if your child is only using one-word phrases, then try two-word phrases (such as "Need help?" or "All done") to increase the chance that they will be able to process what you are saying during times of heightened emotion.

For older children, you want to use language that is only slightly more complicated than the language that they use. It can also be helpful to be as literal and concrete as possible (such as saying "hitting hurts" rather than "hitting is not kind").

5. Be particularly cautious about telling them how to feel. Telling children how to feel ("Don't be so sad") can be invalidating, and research finds that these types of statements may negatively impact children's self-regulation abilities.

6. Give them space to self-soothe to the best of their ability and solve the problem independently before intervening. If we step in every single time that our children are upset and co-regulate and solve the problem for them, they never have the chance to develop these abilities on

their own.

7. Use language after your child calms down. Your words *are* important, and research finds many benefits of using your words for emotional coaching (translation: labeling and validating their emotions). The key is timing. When your child starts calming down, you may want to start talking about their emotions—but make sure you keep your language simple and pair these discussions with emotional regulation strategies. (In my book, I teach children how to use emotional regulation skills on their own.)

Overall Translation

If you've ever tried telling a very angry child, "You feel frustrated right now," you likely know that these types of parenting scripts don't always work in the heat of the moment. Of course, our words *do* matter, and talking about emotions and teaching coping and problem-solving skills are essential for helping children develop self-regulation. Yet research suggests that talking too much during times of distress may not be helpful, and in some cases may even make a child more upset.

Instead of jumping straight into verbal reasoning, parents may want to first focus on maintaining their own calm and simply giving non-verbal cues that they are calm and well-regulated themselves. As the child calms down, parents can

label their emotions and empathize with the child. When the child has become completely calm, parents can then try problem-solving with them: “What could you have done instead of hitting your brother?”

An important caveat here is that every child is different, and parents should observe what works for their individual child. Some children might respond well to verbal reassurance when they are upset, while others prefer quiet, physical comfort, or even a little space or alone time. Your child’s preferences may also change depending on the setting and the emotion they are feeling.

Above all, trust your instincts rather than a canned script from an influencer. Your child needs your authentic self more than anything.