

Words to Calm a Child: **PHRASES EVERY CHILD NEEDS TO HEAR**



When children are experiencing big emotions, they often need us to step in and help them to calm the torrential storm. When a child feels safe with you, they are able to lower their defenses and truly give voice to the feelings inside. Children learn that they will be held and unconditionally loved as they experience all the different facets of life. If a child does not feel safe and learns that only certain emotions are acceptable, the more difficult emotions are stuffed down. These children struggle with feeling psychologically safe and end up disconnecting from the most vulnerable parts of themselves. Research now shows us that emotional constriction can lead to a host of psychological and physical issues that persist throughout the lifespan.

HERE ARE SOME OF OUR FAVORITE PHRASES WHEN OUR CHILDREN ARE STRUGGLING:

WHEN A CHILD IS *Angry*

When children are angry, it is a golden opportunity to connect with them and to show them that we will be there for them during the storms. We don't want to distract, minimize, or bribe our kids through big feelings - rather we want to be fully present, acknowledge their feelings, and then give them lots of space to move through their emotions; this is where the true learning happens.



It is important to remember that guiding your child through emotional experiences does not mean parenting without limits. We can honour feelings **AND** have clear, consistent boundaries with our children. Children who do not have boundaries often feel unanchored, and unsafe with a pervasive underlying theme of not being cared for.

The language we use with our children becomes their inner voice. As the adults in a child's world, we play a pivotal role in determining how a child perceives themselves and others. It can be tricky in those tumultuous moments to remember what to say - particularly if we are having a hard time calming our own heart rate and breathing!

HERE ARE SOME PHRASES YOU CAN USE WHEN YOUR CHILD IS ANGRY:

"I hear you"

"You feel really upset right now"

"You really wanted (brief recap on what the child wanted) . . ."

"This is a big feeling"

"Your heart is beating really fast"

"You didn't feel like that was fair"

"I'm right here"

"You are safe"

"It scared you when I raised my voice"

"You're so frustrated"

"It makes you mad when I _____"

WHEN A CHILD CRIES OR IS *Sad*

When children cry, many adults automatically want to stop the tears. Again, when we stop the tears, we not only halt the emotional process, but thwart any learning that could have emerged from the experience. Very often, even just silently holding a safe space for a child speaks volumes.



THESE SHORT PHRASES CAN HELP A CHILD WHO IS NEEDING AN ANCHOR:

"I'm listening"

"You're really sad"

"You're heart hurts"

"This is so hard"

"I'm here to help you"

"I understand"

"You wish it was different"

"I love you"

"That was a hard day"

"It really does suck"

"It's okay to cry"

"I'll be right here for as long as you need me"

WHEN A CHILD NEEDS *Limits*

All children need limits. Limits help children to navigate their world and to feel safe and cared for. The following is a simple formula created by **Gary Landreth**:

ACKNOWLEDGE THE FEELING. COMMUNICATE A LIMIT. TARGET AN ALTERNATIVE.

Here are some examples:

Acknowledge the feeling >>>> *"You are mad right now"*

Communicate a limit >>>> *"But the sofa is not for jumping on"*

Target an alternative >>>> *"Let's go outside together"*

Acknowledge the feeling >>>> *"You are so frustrated with your sister"*

Communicate the limit >>>> *"But your sister's book is not for destroying"*

Target an alternative >>>> *"You can rip up this paper instead"*

At times, when a child is aggressive, we may need to put a limit in first.

Communicate a limit >>>> *"Mommy is not for hitting"*

Acknowledge a feeling >>>> *"You are mad that playtime is over"*

Communicate a limit >>>> *"Mommy is not for hitting"*

Target an alternative >>>> *"You can hit this pillow instead"*

WHEN A CHILD IS *Anxious*

Anxiety is one of the most common struggles of parents in today's society. Sometimes the anxiety is object/situation specific, or it's more general. Regardless, when children are anxious, it means they are fearful and needing connection; they need to know they're safe before they're ready to venture into the world. We need to calm the part of the brain that is screaming **"Danger! Danger!"**. We suggest you move in close, and try some of these phrases, but **always pair any of these phrases with something to calm the body**: a child cannot think calm thoughts if their bodies aren't calm (i.e., yoga, deep breathing, being held, exercise, gross motor play).



"You are really scared"

"You are so worried about _____"

"You feel really overwhelmed, but this feeling will go down"

"I will stay with you until this feeling gets smaller"

"You are safe with me"

"I'm not going anywhere. Let's do some big breaths until this feeling goes down"

"It's hard to feel this way. But everyone feels scared sometimes"

"I can see you are scared to do that. Would you like to try it together for the first time?"

"That's such a big feeling"

"I'm right here. I won't go away"

"Even though you're scared, we'll figure this out. I believe in you"

"Everyone gets scared. You are still strong"

"This worried feeling will not last forever"

"We will get through this together"

When we *Mess Up* as Parents

Many adults have a difficult time apologizing to children fearing that it will make them seem weak or ineffective. Apologizing to our children has the opposite effect: it teaches authenticity, vulnerability, and courage....the three pillars of resiliency. We lead by example.



HERE ARE SOME PHRASES TO USE WHEN WE NEED TO APOLOGIZE TO OUR KIDS:

“Mommy/Daddy is sorry”

“I really messed up”

“It’s not okay for me to yell like that”

“When I _____, it scared you; that’s not ok”

“What can I do to make this right?”

“Mom/ Dad has to really focus on using a calm voice”

“You were counting on me. I’m sorry”

“I love you and I will make this right”

“I hear you”

“It’s my job to make you feel safe, loved, and heard. I’m sorry”