

Published on [ADDitudeMag.com](http://ADDitudeMag.com)

## How to Defuse an Angry Child

Your child may not be able to use his words to express his feelings calmly—so learn to listen with your heart to help him feel understood.

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### Understanding Misbehavior

When dealing with an angry child, it helps to remember that a lot of misbehavior stems from a strong emotion. Kids often can't articulate their feelings, so they come out in tantrums or defiance. Parents usually react to a child's misbehavior, instead of addressing the feeling that is fueling the behavior. To ease a child's turbulent mood, parents need to help a child feel understood. Learn how with this guide.

### The Emotion-Behavior Connection

The latest brain research helps make sense of misbehavior. When kids are in the throes of a big emotion, their "emotional" right brain has taken over. We usually respond to their outbursts with logic and reason, which are left-brain traits, but these opposite sides of the brain can't work together in that moment. When you learn a specific way of acknowledging emotions, the two sides of the brain can work together.

### Reflective Listening

How can parents determine what feeling is fueling their child's behavior? Try reflective listening, which is about understanding what your child is feeling at the moment, and then reflecting back to him in words what you imagine he is feeling. Ask yourself what feeling might be driving your child to do what he's doing. Don't try to change his thoughts with logic, reassurance, or a lecture. Reflective listening will help your child feel better and, therefore, feel like behaving better.

### Reflective Listening, In Practice

Using reflective listening demonstrates to your child that you care. Have you ever told an upset child, "Use your words"? Often children don't know what words to use. Overtime, reflective listening teaches children a rich and varied vocabulary for expressing their emotions. The following steps will help you incorporate reflective listening into your parenting strategy.

### Put Your Own Emotions On Hold

Put your own emotions and wishes aside temporarily. When we try to deal with a child who is upset, we often get upset. We find ourselves getting angry when our child behaves defiantly, or feeling anxious or guilty because we wish they weren't feeling so bad. The problem is that our strong feelings can cloud our thinking and lead us to react impulsively, rather than taking time to use each interaction to help our children.

### Take a Breather

Before you do or say something, calm yourself down. Here's a tool that has helped a lot of parents accomplish that: Visualize yourself scooping up your anger, worry, or disappointment with both hands and place that uncomfortable emotion at the side of the room. Picturing yourself doing it can clear your mind. Your feeling will still be there, waiting for you, if you want it back later.

### Hear Your Child Out

Stop what you're doing, look at your child, and listen. Sometimes our children are open with us about their feelings, and it's easy to listen. But it's also easy to get distracted. We need to look at our children to show that we are listening. It helps to make listening noises, words, and phrases, such as, "Hmmm," "Oh," "Really,"

"Goodness." These responses make it easier for a child to register that we are listening and that we care how they are feeling.

## Pay Attention to Body Language

But what if your child won't explain what's wrong? You need to "listen" to his body language, facial expressions, posture, or gestures. You can tell something is bothering your child when you hear your son's surly tone of voice, or when you notice that he doesn't want to look you in the eye, even though you may have no idea what triggered it. These are cues for us to stop what we are doing and reflectively listen.

## You're On His Side

Give your child his wishes in fantasy. This strategy shows children that we are on their side. When my son was eight I had to deal with his upset, angry feelings about not being allowed to eat, in one sitting, all the Halloween candy he had collected. With a sympathetic expression and a friendly voice, I said, "Wouldn't it be great if broccoli were bad for you and candy were good for you?" His angry face softened, and then he said, "Yeah, and M&Ms would have a lot of calcium!"

## Reflective Listening Scenarios

Here are examples of reflecting back what your child is feeling:

- When your child complains that he can't do his homework, instead of saying "You can do it. It's not hard," say, "You might be thinking this looks too hard and don't want to get it wrong."
- If you're at a birthday party and your child is hanging around you, instead of "Don't just stand here, go play," try "Maybe you're not sure if those kids want to play with you."

## Parenting Resources

Parenting ADHD kids is no easy task. *ADDitude* has the support you need.

- View Strategies to Help Your ADHD Child Fib Less
- Download 50 Smart Discipline Tips For Your ADHD Child
- View Top 10 Anger Management Tips for Your Child
- Read ADHD Behavior Secrets
- Listen to ADHD Experts Podcast Episode: The Calm Parent

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