



Parenting the Preschooler

Social Competence & Emotional Well-Being Fact Sheets

How do you handle your child's outbursts?

Ages & Stages

PRECHOOLER A child who is 3 to 5 years of age.

YOUNG CHILD A child who is 0 to 8 years of age.

Minding Our Language

Families come in all shapes, sizes, and styles. A “family” may include people who are related by blood, by marriage, and by choice. “Parents” may be biological, step-, foster, adoptive, legally appointed, or something else. When we use the words “family” and “parent” in these materials, we do so inclusively and with great respect for all adults who care for and work with young people.

Nearly every parent has seen their preschooler fall apart at one time or another. During an outburst, children may scream, threaten, throw things, break things, hit, kick, pinch, or spit. While these behaviors may be embarrassing, frustrating, or surprising to parents, it is not uncommon for preschoolers to lose control. Often, overwhelming emotions are to blame.

Preschool-aged children should not lose control as easily or as often as they did when they were infants or toddlers, but their emotions will still get the best of them at times. In fact, having these outbursts is an important part of learning how to handle strong emotions for your preschooler.

While they are still learning, there are some things you can do to help yourself and your child get through these difficult moments.

- Be supportive. (*“I see that you are angry right now.”*)
- Remind them about what is happening when you see they are beginning to lose control. (*“I see you are becoming very upset.” “You look like you are about to explode.”*) Give them ideas about things to do right then to avoid the outburst.
- Stay calm, even if you are embarrassed or frustrated! If you lose control, your child is likely to feel even more out of control.
- Ask your child why they are angry or frustrated, even if you know why. This will help them learn to describe their feelings in words and understand that you care about how they feel.
- Ignore the outburst until your child calms down. Explain that you will be there to talk to them when they are calm.
- Set firm limits about the kind of behavior that is and is not okay. Make sure you enforce those limits all of the time.
- Talk about what happened after your child has calmed down. Help them think of better ways to handle their feelings next time.

- Describe what “out of control” looks like, so your child knows what you mean. As an adult, you know when your child has lost control, for instance when they are screaming, swearing, or throwing things, but they may not recognize it.
- Make sure your child knows some ways to avoid outbursts in the future. Saying what they need, taking three deep breaths before speaking, and asking an adult for help are all good ideas.
- Avoid losing control yourself. If your child does see you lose control, talk with them later about what happened and about what you could have done differently.

Find Out More

MSU Extension provides the following resources for parents and caregivers of preschoolers and young children at no or low cost. Be sure to check out these and other MSU Extension resources available at www.extension.msu.edu.

Extension Extras (<https://bit.ly/2LC2vdX>) – These compilations of news articles, activities, parenting tips and advice are published online Monday through Friday. The resources are designed for parents and caregivers of young children who are home all day during the novel coronavirus pandemic. Each day has a theme: Mindful Mondays, Tips on Tuesday, Working Wednesdays, Thinking Thursday, and Fun Fridays.

Extension Extras Enrichment Kits (<https://bit.ly/35QAplQ>) – These kits feature five or six early childhood activities with learning goals focused in areas such as social and emotional health, literacy, and STEM; a supply list; suggested children’s books; introduction letters explaining how to use the materials; and an evaluation. The kits are available as free downloads.

Early Childhood Videos (<https://bit.ly/3ioyEkS>) – These short videos offer parents and caregivers of young children information on parenting topics. Titles include “Perspective Taking,” “Family Movies,” “Goals of Misbehavior,” “Using Thinking and Feeling Words,” “The Waiting Game,” and “When Siblings Fight.”

Building Early Emotional Skills (BEES) in Young Children (<https://bit.ly/38XW4KI>) – This page provides links to a variety of free online parenting courses, workshops, and events offered by MSU Extension for parents and caregivers of young children aged 0 to 3.

Parenting the Preschooler: Social Competence and Emotional Well-Being © 2021 Michigan State University Board of Trustees. The fact sheets in this series may be copied for purposes of 4-H and other nonprofit educational programs and for individual use with credit to Michigan State University Extension.