

Why Saying “Calm Down” To Your Kids Doesn’t Actually Work

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It’s something I have written about a lot on here. Spirited kids, difficult kids, intense kids...helping them calm down, teaching them tactics to calm themselves. It’s something that we all understand as parents, what it means to calm down. But guess who doesn’t? Our kiddos. I know for me, and I’m willing to bet for a lot of you, when your child starts to scream or flail their arms, an immediate response of ours is to say “calm down”. Maybe we are surprised when it doesn’t actually work. Here’s why.

"Calm down" is a phrase that we all use, especially with kids when experiencing intense emotions. Here are some alternative phrases that just might yield better results, and an action plan to put them in place.

Why to avoid saying “calm down” to upset or angry children

The word calm means ‘not showing or feeling nervousness, anger, or other emotions.’ Helping kids calm down is wonderful, teaching them the tools so that they can achieve calm on their own is even better, but simply telling them to “calm down” isn’t teaching them anything. It’s saying, “you are not allowed to experience anger or other emotions at the moment, stop.” Granted, there are certain times where that is exactly the point we are trying to make, a more useful tactic would be to help them achieve calm, rather than asking them to do so on their own. And, not saying it, IS HARD. I would be lying to you if I said I did all of this every time my spirited one gets upset. But, teaching him coping skills and how to calm himself, without simply telling him to ‘calm down’, is always on the forefront of my mind.

A basic example of this is when a toddler hits, to say “keep your hands to yourself” rather than “no hitting”. Why? Because by telling a child exactly what you want of them, there isn’t any assuming, figuring, or processing of language that needs to take place before the action. By saying “keep your hands to yourself”, the child understands exactly what you are asking of them. Similarly, when saying “calm down”, the phrase requires a lot of language processing in addition to the prerequisite knowledge of how to physically achieve calm. What are some alternatives to the phrase ‘calm down’ and how can you use them?

Find yourself asking your child to “calm down”? Try this instead #parenting @kchiavarone

Alternatives to the phrase “calm down”:

- I see that you are having a difficult time, let me help you.
- Take a deep breath.
- If you need to hit something, hit this pillow.
- That can be so frustrating, let’s figure this out together.

- I see that you are so mad, how does that feel in your body?
- Count to 10.
- Want to squeeze my hand?
- How about a big hug.
- Tell me about it.
- Use an indoor voice.
- Let's take a minute by ourselves to calm our anger.
- Your face is red, try taking a breath to help your heart slow down.
- I hear what you are saying but I don't like to be yelled at.
- Let's focus on fixing the problem together.
- If you are feeling sad, you can tell me about it.

A Plan of Action in 5 Steps:

- Acknowledge the feeling and name it. "I see you are mad."
- Stop any disruptive or destructive behavior. "Close the door gently please."
- Offer an alternative. "Take a deep breath, and scream into a pillow if you need to."
- Encourage communication. "Do you want to tell me why that made you so mad?"
- Plan for next time. "How can we make it better next time?" or "If that happens again, what can you do instead of throwing something?"