

# CREATE

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by Cindy Goldrich, EdM, ADHD-CCSP

**M**ANY ASPECTS OF ADHD can impact behavior and performance, and the traits will impact each child differently. Always remember what it must feel like for these children every day—think of the chaos in their brains. I like the image of different colors of paint swirling together—beautiful, but chaotic at the same time.

Our ability to process information, perform effectively, and regulate our emotions is impacted by what we are expected to manage. As Dr. Russell Barkley analogizes, we all have a limited fuel tank of energy available for controlling our emotions and responding to our world. However, for people with ADHD, because of their inherent deficits in emotional self-regulation, their fuel tank of their inherent deficits in emotional self-regulation, their fuel tank is more sensitive to the impact of their





# CALM [ It Really Matters! ]

environment, expectations, and experiences. The more they are in a situation where they have to use executive functions that may be weak for the task, the more they deplete their self-regulation fuel to approach their world.

Stress for our kids comes from many sources—our yelling, our fighting, and our pressuring them to meet our expectations. Then there is also academic, social, and extracurricular stress. For some people, certain levels of stress can be a motivator. In the short run it can actually get some people to comply, focus, work harder. But guess what? Did you ever notice that all of this well-intended strategy of applying pressure might actually have the opposite effect?

We may have every reason in our minds to justify our anger, frustration, need to rush, and so forth, but I can assure you that in most cases, our stressful stance will

have little positive impact on our kids. Likewise, if they are already in an agitated state, until they can genuinely feel calm, trusting, and safe, they will be unlikely to respond positively to the task before them.

Why? Stress and pressure can shut down the thinking brain—the prefrontal cortex that houses executive function skills. Rational thought is overwhelmed and the brain goes into survival mode, where the emotional brain takes over. This part of the brain is called the amygdala. It is the primitive part of the brain that responds rapidly and reflexively. When you hear a sudden noise, the circuits connecting the thinking brain and the emotional brain shut down. The amygdala reacts immediately to potential danger. The thinking part of the brain disengages so that all of the body's resources can be devoted to survival. Many people get the feeling that they “just can't think straight” during moments of stress.

When the emotional brain is engaged due to a real or perceived threat, we sometimes go into fight, flight, or freeze mode. Keep in mind that kids with ADHD can be up to 30 percent delayed in their executive function skills that govern emotional regulation. Thus, the greater the pressure and stress are, the more their ability to concentrate, pay attention, and regulate their emotions may be compromised.

When kids lose their cool or don't do what we feel they need to be doing—or, worse, if they are doing things we feel they should not be doing—what feelings does this

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# Four Steps to CALM

So, how can you create a calm home? Here are four steps you can take to build a solid foundation of calm for your family.

## 1. Be the change you want to see in your child: Be CALM.

For some of you, or perhaps your significant other, being calm is a tremendous challenge. Instead of focusing first on shaping and changing your child's behavior, you will need to focus instead on shaping and changing your own behavior. You must resolve to display and model self-control and self-regulation. For each person, the how we calm may be different; however, here are a few strategies that will be helpful to most people:

- Slow down and take a breath. A real, calming breath. Slow, deep, controlled breathing will actually change the chemistry in your brain and lower your blood pressure. Yoga is an excellent way to learn and practice relaxing breathing. In only one minute, you can experience a difference.
- Count to 10 slowly and rhythmically in your head. This is not the same as saying to your child, "I'm counting to ten and then you'd better..." This counting is meant for you—to slow yourself down and give you a chance to calm yourself.

- Lower and soften your voice. When speaking softly, it is a lot more difficult to express extreme emotion. It can change the whole mood.
- Notice your body language. You might try sitting down or putting your hands at your side, as this too makes it more difficult to appear agitated or threatening.
- Politely, without judgment, remove yourself from your child. It is very important that you be clear that you are not looking to reject or avoid your child, but rather that you need time to compose yourself so that you can respond more calmly and appropriately. The best thing to do is discuss, during a calm time, that this is something you might do as a way to help you calm down. In this way, you are beginning to model a helpful, appropriate calming technique for your child to copy.
- Remind yourself often that *without calm, no learning can take place*.
- You are in charge of your own reaction! If it helps, post a sign in a few key places in your home that says *Calm is Power*. This will

conjure up in most parents? Frustration, impatience, fear/anxiety, even anger? But what do our kids very often need most from us at these times? Someone who is calm, in control, safe to be with, and accepting of who they are and what they are experiencing. This is not easy—especially if you feel a clock ticking due to work needing to be done, meds that may be wearing off, different people's needs pulling at you, and your own emotional regulation skills! So realize this: Your wise lectures, your pleading and bribing, your reassurance, your words of wisdom, your threats of pending doom... cannot be heard or properly processed.

*Without calm, no learning can take place and no problems can be solved.*

## Your child's calming tools and techniques

Here are some suggestions to get you started.

Consider developing an **"emotional thermometer"** with your child. You can help your child recognize when she is "out of sorts" by gently naming what you see and helping her recognize her state of being (tired, hungry, frustrated, angry, bored, etc.). Rather than tell her how she feels, however, inquire or make a possible observation. "You seem... bored" or "I wonder if you are... hungry."

The thermometer in the example provided shows how the impact of the emotion "anger" can change as one escalates from a calm state to a very agitated state. During a calm time, you can show this thermometer to your child, or better yet, help him create it with you as you ask him how he feels, how he acts, and what happens as a result of his reactions to hypothetical or past situations. You can create a similar thermometer to help him visualize the impact of stress, confidence, or any other emotion.

Help your child recognize the warning signs in his thoughts or body that signals that he is getting upset. Also help him identify the things or situations that tend to trigger his negative moods. If he is frustrated or angry about something, teach him to immediately think of any three positive things he is grateful for to counter the negative thoughts. It won't make the other situation go away, but it might help him be in a better place to deal with it. Sometimes, a teacher may be willing to teach this thermometer to a whole class as a lesson. Kids are often more receptive to learning these things when they "have to" at school.

Make a plan or agreement with him as to how you will both handle things when he becomes upset. Sometimes your mere presence may escalate his intense emotions,



allow you to use *your* executive function skills so you can think, plan, and problem-solve.

## 2. Parent the child you have!

This philosophy will help you keep the proper perspective as you react and respond to your child.

- Let go of expectations connected to a timeline. Remember, your child may be up to 30 percent developmentally delayed—he may just need more time than his peers to show his true potential.
- Let your dreams for your child evolve as he evolves. He will surprise and delight you as he grows in ways you might not yet imagine.
- Slow things down and reduce certain expectations, at least for now. Doors don't always close forever if your child doesn't do everything now. Let go of the myth that your child will be missing out on his major opportunity if he doesn't start certain things now. For many people, just a few extra years to slow down and grow more is all they need to really start to flourish.
- Surround yourself with photos of your child that make you smile. Not those perfect portraits, but the candid ones that show him doing things, living life, and being happy.
- Let go of opinions and judgments from others who may not understand your true chal-

lenges and efforts. For those who understand, no explanations are necessary; for those who don't, sometimes no explanations are adequate.

## 3. Learn to express your feelings without shame, blame, or criticism.

Try to notice the type of language you use when you need to correct or encourage your child. You catch more flies with honey than with vinegar—and you really will get more from your child when he or she can safely hear what you are saying. Replace the shame, blame, and criticism with *empathy, calm, and patience*.

Once you begin to change your own behavior, control your anxiety, and become the calm rock in your home that your kids can count on, you will see this change sweep through your home. If you want your home to feel calm, it must start with you. Then you can begin to focus on how you and your child interact with one another.

## 4. Teach your kids how to be calm.

There will be times when, for whatever reason, stress, anxiety, or anger disrupt a calm environment. While many kids can handle frustration, change, or disappointment relatively well, others have a really hard time. For some kids, it

seems their level of calm can go from 0 to 100 in a split second. Be proactive in teaching your child why calm matters. A good place to start is by teaching them a few basic things about how their brain works. A short, simple lesson can help them understand, value, and take ownership of their actions. Of course, choose a calm, relaxed time to share this information.

It may be helpful for you to discuss the importance of the basic three elements of proper well-being: nutrition, exercise, and sleep. We each have unique needs in each of these areas, and helping your child be aware of his or her own requirements is a wonderful life lesson. When any of these elements is not at optimal personal levels, one's ability to handle daily responsibilities and stressors can be greatly compromised.

Even when your child is aware that being calm is important, it will not be easy for her to do so. Reminding her to calm down will not be sufficient if she does not have the skill or know-how. You can help your child discover her best ways to calm down by exposing her to a variety of ideas and techniques. During a calm, stress-free time, brainstorm with your child ways she can help herself calm down and tools she can use to calm down so that she can be empowered to calm herself as she grows. Be open to providing her with the tools and the space she needs as she learns her own best ways.

and it may be better if you separate temporarily from him. It is important to communicate that you don't want him to feel rejected or abandoned if you decide that separating from him might be helpful. You are simply trying to give you both a chance to think.

Help your child avoid certain people or settings that he cannot manage—for now. If he feels anxious about going to a certain party or event, perhaps you can help him gracefully decline rather than pushing him to go. If going to Aunt Susan's house to play with cousin Sam usually doesn't go well, then perhaps it's best to skip these visits until better coping techniques are developed.

Proactively plan to modify a potentially triggering situation by discussing possible breaks, change of seating, and so forth. This might be helpful for outings such as religious or family events.

When possible, divert your child's attention away from triggering people or situations by mentioning or pointing out something off topic. Anything you can do to "break the current" of the intense emotion may work. A sense of humor might help, but be sensitive so that you do not appear unconcerned about your child's situation.

Have a special signal or code word you can use when

your child has a play date or is in public to help him recognize that his emotions are escalating, and have a pre-planned way to let him gracefully remove himself from the situation. Join your child for a snack and short game to break the tension. Have some games planned in advance that have a definite ending point and don't take very long (Connect Four, Master Mind, two hands of rummy, etc.). While this may seem as if you are rewarding him, you recognize that *without calm there is no learning* or problem solving, so it is best to return to calm so he can move forward. You can revisit the issue when cooler, calmer heads prevail.

Offer a hug and some empathetic words; solving the problem is sometimes secondary to the empathy he may need in the moment.

## Create an actual or virtual Calm Kit

Depending on the age of your child, you may want to help him develop an actual or virtual "Calm Kit." An actual Calm Kit will have some physical items or representations of these items in the form of pictures or words. Your child can decorate a box or keep a backpack full of useful items. Keep a Calm Kit in your child's room, in the

car, or in any other place where it might become useful. In creating an actual Calm Kit, you will certainly want to include your child. The process of making the kit may be a valuable lesson in and of itself. At times, merely having the physical kit will be enough to help your child call upon his or her reserves to switch gears and calm down. Be creative and change the contents often. Here are some physical items you may keep in the kit:

- Stickers
- Crayons
- Paper
- Bubbles (the act of blowing bubbles can help calm a child and regulate breathing)
- Cards
- Play-Doh
- Small hand toys
- Laminated card with ideas like I Spy and other interactive verbal games

You can discuss with your child the ways he can calm down that don't involve "things" that can be placed in a kit, such as the suggestions that follow:

- Have your child regulate his breathing and visualize his body relaxing.
  - *Try this:* At the beginning or end of a meal, or in the car, ask everyone to sit at the edge of their seat so that their backs are nice and straight and their feet are under their knees. Then have everyone breathe in through their nose slowly, then hold for 2 seconds, and then breathe out through their nose slowly. You can have everyone place one hand on their heart and one on their belly so they can feel their breathing. Repeat this three or four times each day. See if everyone can experience a nice, calm feeling.
- Make laminated cards with ideas your child has to help him calm down.
- Suggest quiet time in a room—just like a turtle learns to go into his shell when scared or threatened.
- Provide something for your child to use to vent his anger/frustration (drumsticks on a pillow, punching bag, etc.).
- Suggest physical exercise to release some tension. In fact, exercise increases levels of serotonin, norepinephrine, and dopamine in our brains. A lower level of serotonin is associated with depression. Try a brisk walk or run around the block, 5 minutes of basketball, "wall push-ups" (place your hands on the wall and lean in and out), handball, lifting weights. Playing ping-pong or Nerf ball against a wall can let you hit hard without causing any damage.
- Consider a bath or using some soothing scents.

- Provide a journal or pad of paper for your child to write down thoughts and feelings to help him gain clarity, release negativity, and perhaps begin to brainstorm a more positive response to the trigger.
- See if perhaps your child has or would like some type of soothing blanket or cloth. It need not be associated with a baby blanket to bring true comfort and relaxation.
- Provide music or magazines to flip through.
- Help your child learn words of emotions ("I feel...") so he can tell you how he is feeling. For younger kids, you can print up Emoji pictures with different expressions and laminate them.

Once you have helped your child recapture calm, you can examine (in a nonjudgmental way) what caused the situation and make a plan to move forward. "Hey, what happened back there when I asked you to clear the table?" Try to reconnect with some gentle words or a hug.

### Final thoughts on calm

This is not easy. Especially if you, your partner, or your child is used to a form of coping and communicating that involves high levels of emotional reaction, making change is hard. But not only is change possible, it is effective and oh, so valuable!

I have heard comment after comment from parents I work with telling me that the shift in themselves to stop justifying yelling and start calming down made drastic changes in the dynamics of their family life. Stress levels go down, problems can be handled, and loving feelings can grow. It may require you to modify some of your expectations and desires for now. It may also require you to increase your tolerance of your child's frustration levels when she is bored, disappointed, or angry. Sometimes you cannot, or should not, solve her problem—you can only help her cope with the feeling she is having.

Give yourself a few days to digest and practice these concepts. I promise, there is no magic that will replace the steps you must take along the way.

*Calm is your power!* 🗨️

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