

# I Can't **DO** **IT!**

Frustration happens at every age of childhood. Here's what typically causes it, and how you can help your child deal with it

BY *RACHEL BOWIE*



**F**OR THE PAST 10 minutes Jonathan has been concentrating intensely on coloring three animal figures on a worksheet at the kitchen table. The kindergartner has managed to keep the colors within the outlines of the giraffe and monkey, but his crayon repeatedly strays outside the elephant shape and he becomes increasingly agitated. *Bang!* Jonathan pounds his fist down on the table and bolts from his chair in frustration. “I can’t do it!” he screams.

Watching a child struggle with the simmering emotions that lead to frustration can make any parent anxious. The impulse to swoop in and try to fix the problem hits hard—you want to help your child succeed and to protect him from negative feelings. But there are major benefits to allowing your child to work through a frustrating moment with just the right amount of support from you, says Michele Borba, Ed.D., author of *The Big Book of Parenting Solutions*. “Frustration allows children to practice

problem solving. If they have the experience at home where they can figure out how to cope and manage their emotions with your guidance, all the better.”

Frustration is inevitable in childhood, and each child’s tolerance for it is different. Absent any special needs issues, a moment of frustration can be triggered by hunger, boredom, lack of sleep, the inability to master something new, or having expectations that are too high. “Environment is also a trigger,” adds Borba. “Maybe Grandma is sick or the parents are separated.” Children also tend to mirror their surroundings, says Borba. “If they see that Mom always gets frustrated, they will copy the behavior,” she adds.

By getting to know your child’s temperament and being tuned into his changing needs and growing abilities, you can help him through a challenge. Understanding what tends to trigger frustration by age can also clue you in to what he’s going through—and what kind of guidance to offer.

## THE BABY YEARS

**Trigger:** The first time a baby becomes frustrated is the moment she leaves the womb, says Harvey Karp, M.D., renowned pediatrician and author of *The Happiest Baby on the Block*. After listening to the sound of her mother’s blood flow for nine months, it’s jarring for a newborn to suddenly be without that rhythmic, hypnotic stimulation. Through the first two years, babies become frustrated when they’re hungry, tired, or need to be changed, because they can’t solve those problems themselves. (Thus the crying that tells you that they need your help.) At around 2 to 3 months, Dr. Karp says, the first signs of social frustration begin as your little one starts to interact with you. “A very early form of conversation is what we call reciprocal interaction,” he says. “You coo; she coos. You smile; she smiles. If you’re distracted when she’s ‘talking’ to you, she’ll get frustrated.”

**How to help:** For the first few months, Dr. Karp recommends



trying to replicate the experience inside the womb by using white noise to help your baby sleep. At this stage, teaching her to self-soothe (see “Day Is Done” on p. 33) so that she can calm herself and fall asleep on her own is very important, as is making sure you provide her with basic needs (food, clean diapers, and lots of affection). It’s also very important to engage with your baby—encourage her attempts at conversation as you’re grocery shopping or walking through the park.

## THE TODDLER YEARS

**Trigger:** Children this age are in an awkward spot. Their main source of frustration derives from the fact that their physical abilities and language skills have not yet caught up with their brains. This means that toddlers know what they want (to ride a big boy bike, for example), but they can’t yet achieve their goals. In addition, they have trouble expressing their feelings.

**How to help:** Borba suggests “emotion coaching,” a concept



used by the psychology department at the University of Washington. "Address the emotion your child is experiencing. 'Looks like you're angry,' or 'Looks like you're getting worried,'" she says. These statements are easy for your child to respond to with a simple "Yes," and they help him learn to label his emotions. Determining your child's stress threshold and when to step in to prevent a meltdown is also key. Toddlers don't have coping skills or the ability to push the "off" button when they start to get worked up. "They can barrel ahead very quickly and go into a tantrum where they hit, kick, and scream," Borba reminds. If you can identify when your child is reaching her breaking point and then have her take a break before she gets too agitated, she's more likely to get in the habit of doing the same on her own.

### THE EARLY ELEMENTARY YEARS

**Trigger:** As your child grows older, language becomes less of an issue, but her struggle with the *desire* to do something versus the *ability to do it* still reigns. Children in elementary school,

“ If you can prevent your child from reaching her breaking point with a timeout, it can help her get in the habit of doing the same on her own. ”

says developmental psychology expert Michelle Anthony, become most frustrated during their attempts to achieve mastery in a specific area, whether it's sports, academics, or socializing. They are also becoming more aware of their parents' feelings and emotions and more concerned with



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making sure that they don't disappoint them, adds Borba.

**How to help:** Using short phrases and repetition is the best way to help a 6- or 7-year-old calm herself, says Dr. Karp. "Try something like, 'Marie, I get it, I get it. I see how you feel. Let me suggest something that could help.' The repetition and energy in your voice helps your child realize that you understand her." In general, reassuring her that you love and respect her helps boost her confidence and avoid negative feelings that lead to frustration, as does reminding her of basic truths like "You must practice in order to improve." "I love telling kids that every expert was once a beginner," says Anthony. "It helps them see that everyone starts at the beginning."

### THE TWEEN YEARS

**Trigger:** Your child's attempt to navigate her social world is the main source of anxiety and frustration at this stage. Friendships, fitting in with certain crowds, and defining his own identity in relation to his peers can weigh heavily on your

tween's mind. So, too, can the pressure to do well in school and extracurricular activities.

**How to help:** Tweens should be able to manage frustration on their own in a healthy way. If your child seems to need help, Borba advises you to first watch her to learn the signs that she's becoming frustrated (moodiness, teeth grinding, etc.). Pointing those signs out to her can help her become more aware of the way she feels, which can allow her to slow the process down or stop it in its tracks. Additionally, talk to her about what frustrates her. Explaining things that frustrate *you* can help her see that everyone experiences this emotion. The next step is to provide ideas for coping. "Suggest a positive self-statement he can say to himself to calm down," Borba recommends. "For instance, 'I'm not supposed to be perfect. I'm just supposed to do the best I can.' If he says it enough, the message should kick in." **P&C**

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