

What Are These Executive Functioning Tip Sheets?

THESE TIP SHEETS ARE A RESOURCE FOR YOU!

We made them to accompany our free Executive Function Videos on YouTube. They are for anyone who wants to understand and support a child with executive functioning problems.

WHY?

Many children have trouble with ***executive functioning***. Loving and caring adults are key to supporting children as they develop their executive function skills. We have tips to offer that can make life better for you and for your child.

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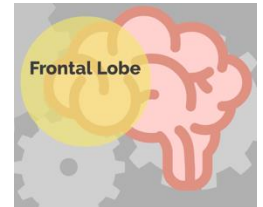
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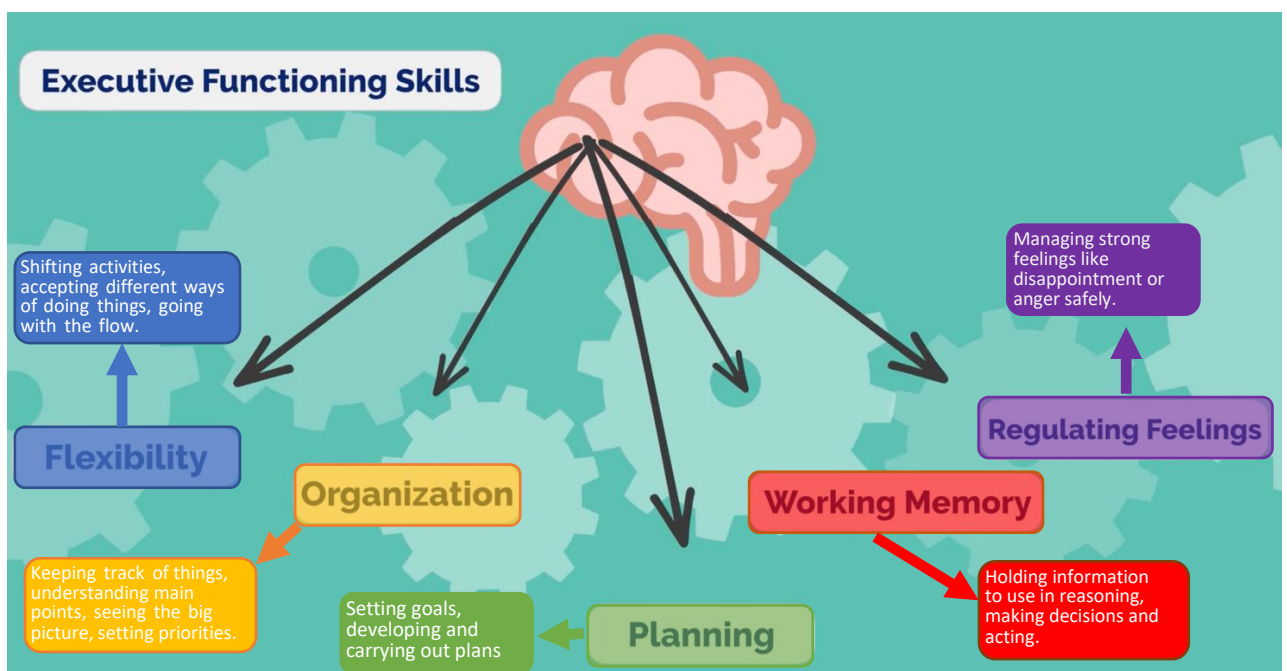
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Understanding Executive Functions

This video describes how difficulties with getting ready, losing things, stubbornness and angry outbursts can stem in part from children's executive functioning (EF) challenges. These skills, which help us "get and do what we want and need" are controlled in the frontal lobe of the brain and keep developing until you are 30 years old (and even at 30, none of us master all of these skills). So, TIME IS ON YOUR SIDE to support your kids in building these important EF skills, and managing your own expectations of them is just as important! If our children can use their EF skills well, they will have a better chance for success in school, joy with friends, and happiness at home.



HERE ARE KEY EXECUTIVE FUNCTIONING SKILLS



Remember: Executive Functioning effects everyone, parents too. We can feel overwhelmed or stressed with our own EF demands. There are lots of things that happen during the day that need EF skills-they are so important for daily life. Understanding you and your child's EF skills and challenges, you can support them in new ways and have fewer problems and conflicts.

Understanding ➡ New Skills



Think “Can’t” Not “Won’t”

A lot of times, children with executive functioning problems confuse people. It looks like they are being bad on purpose, appearing as though they won’t do something asked of them, when really they can’t and are doing their best.

- They could seem to be acting stubborn when their brains are actually stuck and not **flexible**.
- They could seem like they are not trying when they actually have a hard time **organizing** their thoughts and don’t have a **plan** about how get started.
- They could seem defiant, when in fact their **working memory** is challenged because their brains are easily distracted.

Once you understand your child’s strengths and challenges better, you can explain them to other people, so that they will not confuse “can’t” and “won’t” and help your child know what strategies to use.

In the video *“Is it a Can’t or a Won’t,”* Vanessa said that, when Tory was not completing a task, “I needed to identify if he was being defiant, if he was avoiding the task...” She talked with Tory and noted that he would “tense up,” get emotional or seem frustrated if the task was a “can’t.” Troy gave the example of asking Tory to take the trash out. His instructions were too complicated, challenging Tory’s difficulties with distractibility. He needed a lot of repetition or different ways to accomplish the task. They stressed the need to be patient and that what may work for one child may not work for every child.

“He couldn’t do what I asked him to do...But it wasn’t until I toned my rhetoric down [changed my approach] that I was able to see my child struggling.”



So, like Vanessa and Troy, be a detective to figure out what causes your child’s behavior!

Instead of punishing your child for doing something wrong, see if you can figure out where the problem lies. It’s important to determine if it’s a “can’t” or a “won’t.” If it continues to be a challenge, professionals involved in your child’s life can help sort out which difficulties are a result of executive functioning difficulties and which are not.

What is “Being Flexible?” and why is it important

Being flexible means you can change your ideas, do something different than what you thought you would do, think about something differently, and keep an open mind.

Being flexible helps when plans change, compromise is needed, working on skills that are new or difficult and facing unexpected challenges.

When children are flexible, they will have many choices. **You can use phrases like these below, unless your child doesn't like the word flexible, then see if you two can come up with another word that works for both of you. You are trying to build a common vocabulary that helps everyone.**

- ***“Let’s think of a way we can be flexible in case our first plan doesn’t work out.”***
- ***“You can’t always get what you want so you need to be flexible.”***
- ***“You can be flexible, you’ve done it before.”***
- ***“When you shared your game, you were being flexible, and it worked!”***



Example: When Something Has to Wait

You could say, “I was really hoping to clean up the house this morning, but we don’t have time before we have to leave to go to school. Instead of getting upset about it, I am going to ***be flexible*** and do it later today.”

Flexibility Words: Stuck and Unstuck

When you are flexible, you don't get **Stuck**.

Being **stuck** is when you feel you only have one choice of action. Doing the same thing over and over again is unlikely to solve the problem and is likely to make you feel bad. You have to do something different to get **unstuck**.

Think of the last time your car got stuck in the snow or mud. Pressing on the gas harder only got you more stuck. In the same way, your child will often have to do something different to get unstuck.

You can use phrases like these. If your child objects to the word “stuck” the two of you can think of a different word and use that instead.

- *“Are you stuck? How can you get unstuck?”*
- *“When you are stuck you only have one option- to be stuck. That is no fun!”*
- *“Your face and your voice tell me that you’re feeling stuck. I want to help. Let’s think of something that we can do to help you get unstuck.”*
- *“I saw you getting stuck, and then you got unstuck. Great job!”*



Example: Playing a Game

Your child wants to go first in a game, but someone else was chosen. You could ask, “Are you ***stuck***? How can you *be flexible* and still have fun in the game?” Help your child understand that they might go first the next time, which is better than having to stop the game.

“Plan A / Plan B”

Plan A is the way you want to do something.

But, Plan A will not always work out. So you will need a **Plan B**!

The phrase “Plan A/Plan B” is used to communicate that it is normal that things don’t go exactly as you plan, and sometimes it is important to switch plans. Using Plan A/Plan B helps children understand that it is not their fault when something goes wrong or doesn’t go in the way they expected. Having a Plan B allows your child to keep an open mind, maintain choices, and avoid getting stuck, and accomplish goals. When Plan A does not work out, it is not a disaster. We just need a new plan.

Here are some tips and phrases for using Plan A/Plan B

1. Be a model for your child

“Can you help me come up with a Plan B?”

“I am too busy to go to the store today. I will have to make a Plan B and go tomorrow.”



Whenever you try a new plan, say it out loud

2. Talk about a Plan B in case Plan A fails

“What’s your Plan A? Do you have a Plan B, so we can accomplish our goal?”

“That’s a great Plan A. But what if it does not work?”



What else can we do if the swings are taken?

3. Try to use Plan A/Plan B phrases as much as you can. Use praise too!!

“Your Plan A isn’t working, you need a Plan B.”

“You used your Plan B! You were being flexible!”

“I love that you have a Plan A and a Plan B. That’s great planning.”



Example: Breakfast Disappointment

You find that there is no milk for cereal and your child says, “I really wanted Lucky Charms, I’m mad!” You can say, “Cereal was your **Plan A**. I guess it’s time for us to come up with a **Plan B**. ...That’s a great idea to make a special omelet! I know it’s not what you wanted most, but I think it’s better than not eating breakfast. I will be sure to get milk at the store today.”

“Compromising” So Everyone Gets What They Want

Compromise requires flexibility. It means that two people each give up part of what they want so that they can reach an agreement. It does not mean giving up all of what you want. Something is better than nothing!!

Here are the 3 main types of compromise and some phrases to use.

1. Combine ideas so each person gets part of their idea

“We can compromise so we both get some of what we want.”

“Since we both have different ideas, let’s combine them.”

“Wow, we compromised. It was great that we put our ideas together and had fun!”

2. Pick something new entirely that everyone wants

“Since we both have different ideas, let’s pick something that we both like.”

“You want to watch cartoons and I want to watch sports. Let’s compromise and find a fun movie!”

3. Take turns so that each person gets their ideas

“Let’s compromise. You go first, but then it will be my turn.”

“Great job of compromising, we did both of the things We wanted to, one after the other.”

In the video, the boy wanted pasta, but Dad was making sandwiches. Dad showed how to be a model for each type of compromise.



“We each get part of what we want. We can have a little pasta and a side of mini-sandwiches.”

“We can have”



“We can have pasta tonight and sandwiches tomorrow.”



Example Playing with Friends

Your child wants to play tag, but their friend wants to play with Legos. You could say, “Can you **compromise** and play tag first and then Legos? Then you will both get what you want in the end.”

Expect the Unexpected and Manage Disappointment

The video described a number of situations where children get upset when things don't go their way, like when they EXPECT SOMETHING SPECIFIC and it does not happen or they can't do what they want to do. It is hard for them to get past the disappointment. THE FEELINGS CAN BE OVERWHELMING.

Here's how can you help your child deal with disappointment when something they anticipated does not happen. Help your child prepare to



One example was presented in the video. A boy was excited to go to the park the next day, but the Dad reminded him to expect the unexpected and suggested other options in case they could not go.

Remember to LIVE OUT LOUD – Show your child how you expect the unexpected. The Mom in the video wanted to get a favorite donut, but she showed how she expected the unexpected.

Sometimes preparing does not work. Your child may still have a big reaction. Here are some things to do.

- Listen to their feelings and let them know you understand.
"It is so disappointing when what we want does not happen."
- Use and model your own ways to cope to stay calm.
- Help them use coping strategies
"Let's try taking a deep breath together or going for a walk."
- Once your child is feeling better, they will be more able to talk and problem solve.

Here are some more ways to help your child handle the unexpected



Give warnings:

"5 minutes before you have to stop watching TV."

Be clear:

"We are going to Aunt Sophie's for dinner and a movie. Do you have questions?"

Give lots of praise:

"You were super flexible when we had to turn off the TV to go to Aunt Sophie's. You really handled the unexpected."

“Big Deal/Little Deal”

Teaching children to tell the difference tell the difference between **BIG DEALS** and **little deals** help them cope and make better decisions.

BIG DEALS are situations that are very important and your child might need help to solve the problems.

little deals are situations that are much less important and children can quickly fix on their own.

You can help your child cope with **BIG DEALS** and figure out how to turn them into **little deals**. Here are some tips on doing that and some phrases to use:

4. **Be a model for your child by saying things out loud.**
5. ***Listen to your child when they are upset; Let them know you get how they are feeling. Don't tell them what to feel.***
“Does this feel like a Big Deal or a little deal?”

If the response is BIG DEAL, don't say “that seems like a little Deal.” Say, “I can tell this seems like a BIG DEAL.”

- ***Help figure out how to turn the BIG DEAL into a little deal and let your child know you are proud.***

“I could tell that it felt like a BIG DEAL to you, but you worked to make it a little deal. You're such a terrific problem solver!”

“Great job turning a BIG DEAL into a little deal.”



“This is a Big Deal
but I think I know
how to fix it.”



Example: Having to Stop Before Finishing Something

You could say, “Can you **be flexible** and stop that even though you aren't finished?” If yes, then praise flexibility, if no, then say, “I can see that getting interrupted like this is a **BIG DEAL**, but you need to stop now so we can go to see Aunt Maria. Could we make this a **little deal** by putting your game in a safe place, so you can finish it as soon as we get back?”

Flexibility Words: Choice/No Choice”

Often children have **choices**. They can choose from menu options or movies, and can often choose when they will do something. There are other situations when they have **no choice**. They have to go to school, do homework, and go to the doctor.

Choice or no choice helps children understand when they can negotiate and when they have to just accept something they don't want. It also makes it clear that no choice situations are just the way the world works. Look for "choice" situations, and save “no choice” only for truly no choice situations.

You can use phrases like:

- *“Is this a choice or no choice situation?”*
- *“Even though I don't want to do it, this is a no choice for me.”*
- *“This is a no choice situation because...”*
- *“There will be a no choice situation today (explain the no choice situation). Let's make a plan for how we will face our no choice situation.”*



Example: Going to the Doctor

Your child wants to stay at home with her cousin Sarah on the day of a doctor's appointment. You could say, “I wish this was a **choice** situation, but it is a **no choice** because you need to visit the doctor to make sure you are healthy and strong. Let's make a plan for how we will face our **no choice** situation. When we get home, you have a **choice**. Do you want to go to the park with Sarah or watch a movie?”

Break it Down

Children with executive functioning problems have a hard time with big jobs that are not broken down. The mother in the video is frustrated because she is constantly telling her child how to clean their room. Kids may know how to do something, but they get overwhelmed. Just getting started can challenge them. They may get upset and act out. That often makes parents upset too.

Why take the time to break this down into step-by-step pieces?



What can you do to prevent this from happening and get things done??
BREAK THE TASK DOWN. Here are the steps.

1. Write the steps down.
2. Begin with the smallest step that your child can manage successfully. Then praise them when they do it.
3. Once they have completed step one, then do the next step and so on, praising each time, until the job is done.
4. Keep practicing the task.

The father in the video was not sure about Break it Down. However, if a child is always struggling with a task, experiment with the Break it Down steps. If the experiment works, the child feels more confident and independent.

Isn't spoon feeding my child just keeping her from becoming more responsible?



Here are some other tips for using Break it Down:

- Don't use Break It Down on lots of tasks at once
- Reduce your praise and support as your child learns the task.
- Figure out what parts of a task are most difficult and then focus on helping your child with that part.
- Break any task that is hard for your child into progressively smaller chunks until your child is successful.

Talk Less, Write It Down

Parents often feel like talking to their kids is like talking to a brick wall. ➡

When kids get upset, their language systems don't work as well. Don't talk, just help them to be safe and calm down. Maybe they need their favorite soft toy or a snack, or just quiet time with themselves. Plan a happy time like going for a walk or playing at a park to talk with your child to develop a plan ahead of time for when they are upset in the future. In this time you can practice strategies like taking a deep breath. **It is good to make a drawing to remind them of those strategies.**

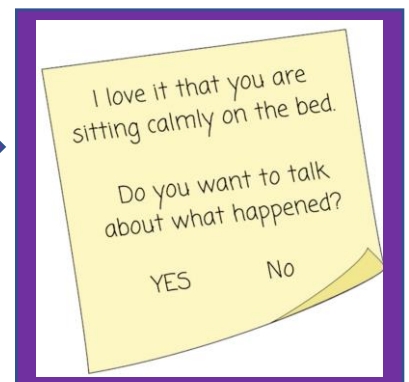
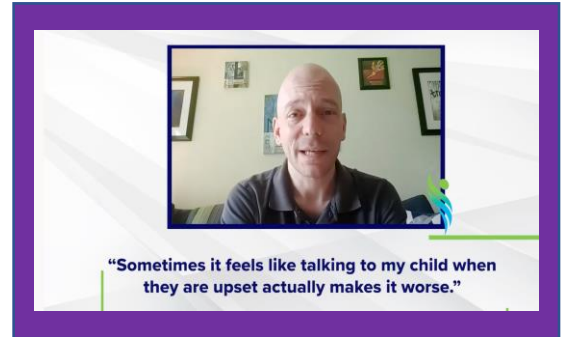
When a child is really upset and emotions are high, thinking and doing skills are more difficult. This can be very upsetting for parents as described by this father in the video. ➡

Returning to a calm state may take your child a long time. Talking to them may not be successful. A good way to see if your child is ready to talk and think about what happened when they were upset is to **WRITE A NOTE**.

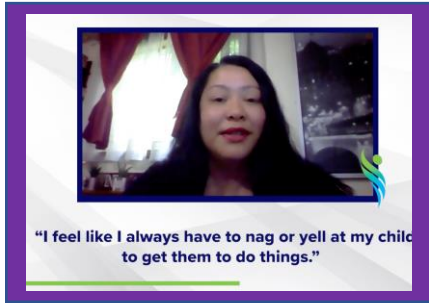
Here is an example of such a note from the video. ➡

Writing is a beautiful way of engaging after a difficult time because:

- It allows you time to think what you want to say
- It gives time for your child to get calm and less emotional as they read your message



- It is a way of checking in and supporting your child's efforts to get calm



Writing can also be a tool to use in situations like that described by this mother in the video.

PUT THE POWER ON THE PAPER !!

Make a checklist for what you want to happen at a certain time, like mornings. It helps kids remember what they need to do and not be distracted. Then you can say **"Check your Checklist"** instead of being a nag.



Planning Steps: Plan and Do

A **plan** is how your child gets to their goal, and **do** is carrying it out.

Plans need to be discussed in advance during a happy time (not following an incident when your child might feel triggered). Plans need to be positive and specific, and because some plans will not work, your child should always have at least one other plan – Plan B. Remember, good planning is not about getting it right the first time but about changing the plan when needed. Once your child has a specific plan to reach a goal, it is time to try it out. Carrying out the “**Do**” step is critical!

When planning, you can use phrases like:

- ***“My plan is...”***
- ***“What is your plan?”***
- ***“I need a Plan B.”***
- ***“You are terrific at making plans!”***

Children need help in “doing” the plan. It is the hardest part!

Example: Cleaning Your Room

“If your **goal** is to get outside and play with your friends, then you should make a **plan** for getting your room cleaned super fast. Do you want to set a timer and make it a race?”



To help your child carry out a plan, use phrases like:

- ***“This looks like a great plan! Let’s think about when you can try it out...”***
- ***“You made a great plan for how to reach your goal. Now try your plan out. What is the first step?”***
- ***“Okay, I made my plan, now I am going to try it out.”***
- ***“Now that I have set my goal and made my plan, I am going to do it.”***

Example: Picnic

“It’s a beautiful day for your **plan** to go to the park for a picnic. We’ve done all the steps--made the sandwiches, packed the drinks and I have money for ice-cream. Let’s do it!”



Planning Step: Check

Some plans that seem like they will work really well do not. Other times important steps in a plan get missed. That is why it is important to **check**.

Children need to check a plan to see if it is working and if the goal is being achieved. When you and your child check a plan, you can help them make any changes that are needed for the next time. **You can use phrases like:**

To help your child check a plan, **you can use phrases like:**

- *"Let's check the plan. How did it go?"*
- *"On a scale of 1 - 3 where 1 = did not work, 2 = kind of worked, and 3 = worked great, how did the plan do?"*
- *"It looks like some parts of the plan are working but other parts aren't. What would you like to change?"*
- *"Great job checking your plan!"*

You can easily combine
Planning and **Flexibility**
terms!

Example: Lego Sharing

Let's check on your plan for Jamal's visit because I can see you are upset. Your **goal** was to ask Jamal over and use Legos to build a cool house with your friend. You had a **plan** to divide the Legos in half and each build a part of the house. I hear though, that Jamal wanted some of your Legos. Is this a **Big Deal or a little deal?** We may have to think of a **Plan B** and **compromise**. What is a way you can use the Legos that is fair to both of you? Yes! You can each choose 10 Legos from each other's pile – that is a great **Plan B**. Great work in being **flexible**! Let's go with your new plan!" I will check in with you later to see how that plan worked.



Planning and Setting Goals Together

The key part of planning is to help children identify and focus on the **goal** of an activity, something that they want or need to do, and **why** they want to do it.

Learning to set and reach goals is a critical life skill!

But, as the parent in the video asks,

Here are some tips to answer that question

First, help your child set their own goals.

- Notice when your child is working on a goal and focus on it and be specific, using phrases like:
"Maybe finishing that puzzle could be a goal for this weekend."

"Do you have a goal of meeting your friends today?"

- Model setting your own goals, like
"My goal is to make enough dinner tonight."
- Praise your child for setting a goal.



How do I get my child to work toward the goals I set for them?

Second, make sure your child knows why they have a goal. This will help them stick with it

To focus on why, you can use phrases like:

- *"Why is that goal important?"*
- *"Why did you choose that for your goal?"*

However, parents get frustrated when kids don't follow the plan to reach the goal.



How do I get my child to stop saying "I can't do it" when I know they can?

Breaking a plan down:

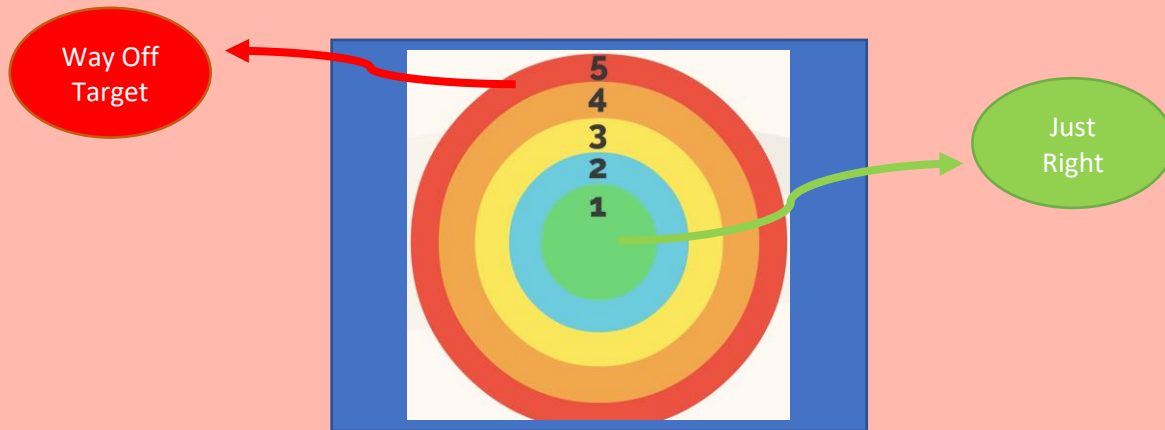
- Helps your child know where to start
- Makes it seem easier to follow and reach the goal
- Allows blame to be put on the plan not the child when things don't work out, blame the plan not the child.

So, third, make sure the plan can be followed. Break it down into small, doable steps. Use visuals

Managing Intense Feelings

Here are some tips to help your child regulate emotions:

- Help children understand that their feelings have different intensities. You can use a feelings chart.



- Focus on the intensity of the feeling, rather than its name because our feelings are often made up of lots of emotions and hard to describe.
- You can just use the numbers rather than the chart like the Dad in the video.
- Model doing something to help yourself feel better. In the video, the Dad says *"There's nothing I can do about the traffic. I'm going to take a deep breath and send them a text that we are running late."*



Sometimes, your child's emotions may be out of control. It is not going to do any good to yell, bargain or punish them. As the video suggested, these intense emotions are like a storm. **THEY WILL PASS.** So, what can you do to help?




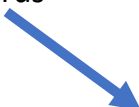
- Use methods to calm yourself
 - Taking a deep breath
 - Try not to worry what others think
- Most importantly, focus on your child's safety
- When your child's feelings are less intense, like a 3 or lower, help them figure out why. The Mom in the video talked about the child's meltdown while they were petting their dog, because they enjoy that.

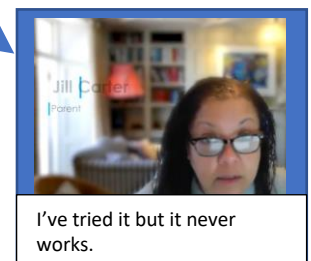
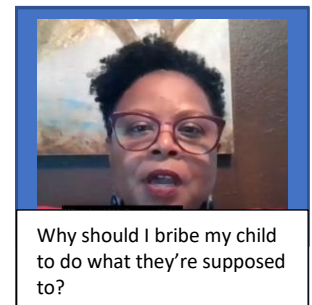
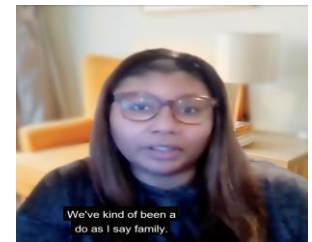
It is important to remember that sometimes, intense emotions are appropriate, like when something bad happens to a loved one or a pet. In the video, a child accidentally broke a family treasure. At times like this, just let your child know you understand the feelings. The Dad comforts his son and says,



Motivation: How Everyone in Your Family Can Get More of What They Want

Here are some tips about how your family can get more of what they want.

- **Work on what the child wants.** Parents often want their child to “Just do what I want” like the father in the video.  It may be better to try to get them to do more of what they want. By doing this, you can also get more of what you want too.
- **Be a “do as I do” family.** The mother in the video is used to a family where parents “do as I say.” But kids really look to their parents to show them **what to do, how to do it, when to do it and why to do it**. Modeling for our kids is the best way to shape their behavior. 
- **Reward instead of bribe.** A bribe is when you give something to motivate someone to do something you want in the future. This does not work well with kids. Here is a bribe: “I will give you ice cream now if you behave at grandma’s tonight. This does not work because the behavior can’t be enforced – how can you get the ice cream back if they behave badly? Rewards are given **IF** the child behaves as asked. This is a reward: “If you behave at Grandma’s, we’ll stop for ice cream on the way home. It’s like a paycheck! 
- **Frequent and meaningful rewards and praise.** As the parent expressed in the video, it is really frustrating when you try rewards but they don’t seem to work. There are some ways to make rewards more successful.
 - Use rewards that are important or of value for the family and meaningful to your kids, like shared activities. Work them out with your kids. Identify things they really want.
 - Day-to-day we tend to do more commands and corrections than rewards or praise. Try to do about 5 times as many praise and reward statements as corrections or commands. This will make a big difference. It will feel better.
- **Don’t make it too complicated.** Some parents set up sticker charts to track behaviors and rewards, but for others it is hard to keep up with that system with all the other stresses in their life. In that case, make it more simple. Just do it verbally, like “a double gold star for helping your sister,” “you get bonus points for that!” Use a system that fits in with your is more likely that you can keep it going.



Preventing Overload

The video describes a number of situations where children feel overwhelmed. They get so upset it feels like they are out of control and there is nothing anybody can do to help them. Both children and adults can get overwhelmed, when situations push them past their limits and emotions take over. Children may yell, storm off, break something or hit a sibling. When people are overwhelmed, they cannot slow down and make good choices. They feel stuck. Often, they say or do something that they regret.

So, what can you do when your child gets overwhelmed?

First, help yourself and your child to feel calm, like deep breaths or time alone.

Then, try to identify the triggers that caused your child to feel overwhelmed. That will help you figure out how to prevent getting overwhelmed in the future. Triggers are things that make us feel stressed and overloaded. In the situation from the video, the child is hungry and in a crowded place – TRIGGERS!

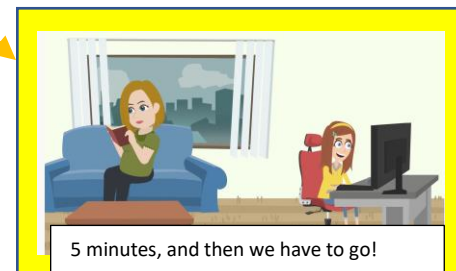
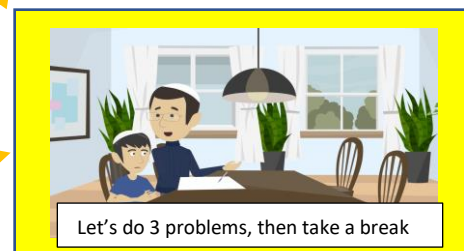


If you know what triggers your child, you can prepare in advance. In this case, the mom reduced the overload by giving the child a toy and something to do to distract her.

It is important to notice your own triggers, too. That way, you can avoid getting overwhelmed yourself.

What are some other types of triggers that we should look out for and possible ways to avoid being overwhelmed?

Trigger	Response
Not knowing what to expect	Prepare for the unexpected
Tasks that are hard	Help break it down
Stopping an enjoyable activity	Giving warnings



Your child will still get overwhelmed at times. They seem able to manage things one day but not the next. Try to understand that your child is struggling when they are overwhelmed, and not being disobedient. This will make it easier to prevent problems before they happen.