

Connect and Shape

Many parents are unsure of what to do when their child is **both** experiencing heightened emotion **and** engaging in problematic behaviour **at the same time**. Parents have often heard that they should respond to their child's emotions with acceptance and validation, being compassionate and responsive to their child's emotional needs. Yet, parents have often also heard that they need to be careful not to reinforce problematic behavior, that it is important to handle problematic behavior without giving it undue attention or even with specific parenting strategies such as logical consequences or time out. These two evidence-based pieces of advice seem contradictory and it is confusing for many parents.

However, it is possible to **both** respond to your child's emotion with acceptance and validation, being responsive to underlying emotional needs **and** to ensure that you aren't reinforcing problematic behaviour at the same time.

You can do this by following the overall approach **Connect and Shape**. Here's what to do:

1. Ideally, give no attention to the problematic behavior itself. The problematic behavior may include yelling, whining, stomping feet, and other tantrum behavior. Some kinds of problematic behavior, particularly physical aggression, require an immediate response to minimise harm. If some response is necessary, then do what you need to do to minimise harm, but do so with minimal attention and fuss. Instead of immediately focussing on the problematic behaviour, focus on your child's emotion.
2. **Validate your child's emotion by verbally labelling it**, for example, 'It is tough. You are feeling sad.' If you think that your child's emotional display is fake, a deliberate display to get a particular result rather than a genuine emotional response, then **validate your child's desire by verbally labelling it**. For example, 'you'd like to keep playing. I get that.' Validate in a way that is **accepting and empathetic** but also **calm and matter of fact**.
3. Next, **scaffold a more adaptive behavior**. This means give your child a prompt to a reminder about a more adaptive way your child could behave, given the situation and how they are feeling. Usually it means reminding your child that you are available to help them or to soothe them if they ask. For example, 'if you want help, just ask,' or 'I'm here with a cuddle if you want it.'
4. If your child persists in problematic behavior then it is time to implement an appropriate parenting strategy. This is often as simple as **continuing to ignore the problematic behavior**. It could also mean using logical consequences or time out. Whichever strategy you choose, remain within sensory distance, with open and calm body language; conveying acceptance for your child's emotions.
5. You might choose to **scaffold adaptive behavior again**. For example, you might say, 'I am happy to help. Just say "help" if you want me to help'. This makes it very clear to your child that you are available to them, without accidentally reinforcing problematic behavior and without accidentally being intrusive. After all, an angry child doesn't necessarily want to be immediately hugged. It is more appropriate to **let your child lead**; letting your child signal to you what they need emotionally.
6. **Keep waiting**, being available while also ignoring problematic behavior until your child shows an adaptive behavior or a behavior that is at least **more** adaptive. Often this will mean that your child signals/asks for help or signals/asks for emotional support in a more adaptive manner. It may be subtle. For example, as simple as physically moving towards you. **Do not**

wait for perfection. It can be rough and imperfect. **It just needs to be better.** For example, saying 'help', even in a whining voice is better screaming and throwing things.

7. The moment you notice your child engage in an adaptive or a more adaptive behavior (no matter how rough and imperfect it still is) **respond!** For example, if your child physically approaches you then open your arms for a hug, if your child asks for help then immediately do your best to help them. By giving your child the help or comfort that they are asking for the you are reinforcing their more adaptive behavior. By responding to behavior that's better even if it is also rough and imperfect, you are shaping your child's behavior. Gradually, with time, it will get better and better still.

Connect and Shape is shown in full in this flow chart:

