

# BIG EMOTIONS & BIG BEHAVIOURS

Big emotions are part of growing up. But when tantrums, aggression, or defiance are intense, frequent, or interfering with family life or school, extra support can help.

## What “big behaviours” can look like

- Meltdowns or tantrums that feel “out of control”
- Hitting, kicking, biting, throwing, or breaking things
- Running away, refusing, or yelling “no” repeatedly
- Big feelings that flip fast (happy → furious → sad)
- Behaviour that is much worse during transitions

## What is typical? What might be a sign to get help?

Some tantrums and limit-testing are common between ages 2–5, but concern increases when behaviour happens most days and lasts a long time (10–15 minutes or more), safety becomes an issue, school or daycare is calling frequently or sending your child home, family life feels controlled by the behaviour, or consistent strategies tried for several weeks lead to little improvement.

## Common reasons big behaviours happen

Behaviour is communication. Often the message is “I can’t cope right now.” Common drivers:

- Big feelings + not enough coping skills yet (emotion regulation is still developing)
- Hunger, tiredness, sensory overload, or changes in routine
- Anxiety (worry can look like anger or refusal)
- ADHD / impulsivity and trouble with waiting, stopping, or shifting tasks
- Learning or language challenges (can’t explain needs; school feels too hard)
- Stress at home (conflict, separation, grief, moving, bullying)

## What helps

### A) Connect first, then correct

Get close, get low, and keep your voice calm by naming what's happening (e.g., *"You're having a hard time"*) and aiming to be a calm anchor, since your calm helps your child's nervous system settle.

### B) Prevent: routines + warnings

Use simple routines and rituals (morning, after school, bedtime), give brief warnings before transitions (e.g., *"5 minutes, then shoes"*), and offer small choices (e.g., *"red shirt or blue shirt"*) to reduce power struggles.

### C) Teach calm skills when things are calm

Practice simple calming skills daily, such as *"balloon breathing"* (slow in, slow out), and create a calm-down kit with items like a fidget, paper to draw, a sensory object, or a water bottle. Help your child name feelings (e.g., mad, sad, worried, tired), which supports emotional organization.

### D) During a meltdown: keep it simple

Put safety first by moving dangerous items, giving space, and supervising closely. Use very few words, as long talks can escalate meltdowns, and after things have settled, return to repair by naming the difficulty and planning for next time (e.g., *"That was hard. Next time, we'll try \_\_\_."*).

### E) Use clear limits + quick praise

State what you want to see rather than only what you don't (e.g., *"Hands stay gentle"*), praise effort immediately to reinforce control, and use simple, predictable consequences that are short, calm, and consistent.

## When to seek extra help

Consider assessment or therapy when aggression or unsafe behaviour is occurring, your child is struggling at school, daycare, or in friendships, sleep is poor and behaviour is escalating, you suspect anxiety, ADHD, learning, or developmental differences, or family stress is high and you need a clear plan. Support may include parent coaching using evidence-based strategies, child skill-building (emotion regulation, coping, social skills), family sessions to strengthen communication and routines, collaboration with school or daycare (with consent), and assessment to better understand what is driving the behaviour and which supports will help most.