

The SOOTHE Strategy to Help Parents & Caregivers Respond to Anxious and Emotional Children



- ★ It is important for parents and caregivers to develop specific skills to respond to their child when they are feeling emotional or anxious.

- ★ The acronym SOOTHE helps parents and caregivers remember these skills.
 - **S – Soft Tone of Voice**
 - Preschoolers often handle their anxiety by throwing tantrums.
 - When parents respond to the tantrum by becoming louder or more intense in their own voice, it will only make the tantrum bigger and longer.
 - Take a couple of deep calming breaths so you can speak in a soft, nurturing (or at least neutral) tone of voice. The child can latch on to this and begin to de-escalate and match your level of regulation.

 - **O – Organize**
 - An anxious and emotional child often loses the ability to sequence information. Not knowing what is expected can increase intense feelings.
 - Develop schedules and consistent routines.
 - Provide help at transitions times and prepare them for any changes in the routine.

 - **O - Offer**
 - Children can easily overwhelmed by too many choices. The child is soothed by offering a narrower range of choices.
 - Some children compensate for their anxiety by trying to be in control of every decision. They may have a total meltdown when told exactly what they have to do. In these situations, the child benefits from you offering choices with parameters. For example, a child who needs to drink some juice can be offered apple juice or orange juice and gets to have some control in the decision while still staying within the boundaries set by you.

 - **T – Touch**
 - A simple touch or increased physical proximity can be very helpful in helping an anxious and emotional child cope. At the end of the day, for example, when a child is overtired, some cuddle time can have a more soothing effect than words.

- **H – Hear**
 - Refers to the parent’s ongoing job of trying to figure out what the child needs.
 - At times, it may seem like the child is being defiant, however the behaviour may be driven by the child not understanding what to do. In these situations, it is important to offer their help to work through the problem. For example, if a child is asked to go and put on their snowsuit and the child refuses, then you might say, “Please go get your snowsuit, and I will help you put it on.”

- **E – End and Let Go**
 - There are two important parts to ‘End and Let Go.’
 - The first point refers to helping the child completely deescalate and calm before returning to their activities. When they return too soon, they quickly have difficulties.
 - The second point has to do with your reaction to the child’s meltdown. It is often challenging for to support a child through a tantrum or meltdown and you may feel you need some recovery time before you can respond to your child. However, it is directly after the meltdown when a child may feel most vulnerable and even ashamed of his or her irrational behaviour. **It is essential you reconnect with your child to provide immediate soothing to your child and to repair the parent/child-relationship.** While it is important to acknowledge your right to your own anger and exhaustion, you are asked to let go of it and remain responsive to your child after meltdowns.

Adapted from Paris Goodyear-Brown in Play Therapy for Preschool Children edited by Charles Schaffer (2010)

