

Understanding, Managing and Supporting Big Emotions

A parent guide to what may be happening before, during and after an emotional storm - with practical support that goes beyond simply telling a child to calm down.

Children with ADHD can experience emotions quickly and intensely. Excitement, disappointment, frustration, embarrassment, anger and worry may arrive with little warning and can be difficult to shift once the nervous system is highly activated. Executive-function difficulties can also make it harder to pause, organise a response, remember a coping strategy or explain what is wrong while the feeling is happening.

Big emotions are not automatically bad behaviour, but feelings do not remove boundaries either. Parents can validate the emotion while still keeping people and property safe. The goal is not to stop a child feeling strongly. It is to help them recognise what is happening, move through it safely and gradually develop more ways to respond.

Look underneath the reaction

What you may see	What might be underneath	What may help
An enormous reaction to a small change	The visible event may be the final demand after a day of accumulated effort, uncertainty or sensory load.	Reduce language, lower immediate demands and explore the wider build-up later.
Shouting or saying hurtful things	Impulse control and access to thoughtful language may collapse when arousal is high.	Hold the boundary without trying to conduct a long lesson in the middle of escalation.
Crying after school	The child may have held themselves together all day and released the strain in a safer place.	Offer recovery before questions, homework or additional demands.
Cannot use a known calming strategy	Knowing a skill when calm is different from accessing it when overwhelmed.	Practise tools outside crisis and let adults provide more regulation support when needed.
Deep shame afterwards	The child may understand the impact once regulation returns and fear they are 'bad'.	Repair the behaviour without turning the incident into an identity.

Regulation comes before reflection

When a child is highly activated, this is rarely the best moment for repeated questions, explanations, consequences or demands for an apology. Use simple language, reduce stimulation where possible, maintain necessary safety boundaries and help the nervous system come down. The conversation about what happened can wait until thinking is more available.

Validation is not the same as agreement

You can say, 'I can see how angry you are' without agreeing that hitting is acceptable. You can understand why a child felt rejected without confirming every interpretation they made while distressed. Validation tells the child their internal experience has been noticed; boundaries tell them what must still remain safe.

Supporting the emotional storm

A useful plan has three parts: what helps before emotions peak, what helps during the peak, and what helps afterwards. Many families focus only on the middle, when the child has the least access to new learning.

BEFORE - notice the build-up	Learn early signs: faster speech, pacing, repeated questions, irritability, silence, rigid thinking, sensory seeking or withdrawal. Early support usually needs less effort than crisis support.
DURING - make things simpler	Use fewer words, one safe adult where possible, space or closeness according to the child, and remove unnecessary demands. Keep essential safety limits clear.
AFTER - repair without shame	Reconnect first. Later, identify what happened, who was affected, what needs repairing and what could help next time. Avoid making the child relive the incident repeatedly.
BETWEEN - practise when calm	Build emotional vocabulary, body awareness and coping tools during ordinary moments. A strategy becomes more accessible under stress when it is familiar before stress.

Build a toolbox, not one compulsory technique

Breathing helps some children and frustrates others. Useful regulation may involve movement, pressure, music, quiet, drawing, water, a familiar object, headphones, a darker room, talking, not talking, humour or being near a trusted adult. A strategy is useful because it helps this child regulate safely - not because it appears on a standard calming list.

What about consequences?

Safety and accountability matter, but consequences given at the emotional peak often add more activation without teaching the missing skill. Once calm, focus on repair and proportionate responsibility. If something was broken, someone was hurt or a boundary was crossed, address it. Also ask what support or skill was missing before the behaviour occurred.

The parent's nervous system matters too

Repeated intense reactions can leave parents braced for the next one. Notice your own early signs - faster speech, repeating yourself, arguing, feeling trapped or becoming louder. If another safe adult can take over, use that support. If not, simplifying your words and slowing your own response can reduce the amount of emotional fuel in the room.

When school sees a different child

A child may appear settled at school and unravel at home. This does not mean the parent is causing the behaviour or that school reports are wrong. The child may be using considerable effort to meet school expectations and releasing accumulated strain later. Share patterns across settings, including transitions, lunch, sensory load, social demands and what happens after school.

Look beyond ADHD when needed

Intense emotional distress can have many contributors, including anxiety, autism, trauma, bullying, sleep difficulties, learning needs, sensory differences, physical discomfort, medication effects and family or school stress. Do not assume every emotional difficulty is simply part of ADHD.

My Big Feelings Support Plan

Complete this when everyone is calm. The plan is designed to help adults notice patterns and make support more predictable before the next difficult moment.

My early signs that feelings are getting bigger	_____
Common triggers or situations	_____
Things that make overload worse	_____
What helps before I reach the peak	_____
What helps me during a big feeling	_____
Do I prefer space, company or a choice?	_____
Words adults can use that help	_____
Words or actions that usually make it harder	_____
How I like to reconnect afterwards	_____
What repair may look like	_____
Who else needs to understand this plan?	_____

Helpful language

Try: 'Your feelings are really big right now; I am here.' 'I won't let you hurt me, and I will help you get through this.' 'We don't have to solve it while your body is this overwhelmed.' 'Would you like space or would you like me nearby?' 'What happened needs repairing, but it does not change how much I love you.'

When to seek additional help

Seek appropriate professional support if emotional episodes are frequent, severe, worsening, creating significant risk, causing persistent school refusal or family breakdown, or are accompanied by concerning changes in mood, sleep, eating or functioning. Urgent help is appropriate where there is immediate danger, serious self-harm risk or risk to others.

A message for parents

You do not have to choose between compassion and boundaries. Your child can need understanding and still need limits. They can be responsible for repair without being shamed for having a nervous system that becomes overwhelmed. Progress may look less like 'never having a big emotion' and more like noticing sooner, recovering more safely, accepting support and learning what helps.

Further reading and guidance

Useful starting points include NHS information about ADHD, NICE guideline NG87, ADHD Foundation resources and Ross W. Greene's work on collaborative problem solving. This resource is educational and does not replace individual medical, psychological, educational or safeguarding advice.

Space to Breathe Therapy

ADHD Parent Support Series - Part 17