



FOR HSLDA'S

PRESCHOOL PARENTS

A brief introduction
from Vicki Bentley **42**

Ten *dos* and *don'ts*
for meltdowns **42**



EXCLUSIVE ONLINE SUPPLEMENT

A brief introduction to this article

I'm guessing that most of us parents have experienced at least one of those not-so-fun moments in a grocery or department store, when our child has a meltdown and we are at a loss as to how to defuse the situation. A few years ago, I heard Kirk share some encouraging tips at a Calm Parenting seminar, and I wished I'd heard him years ago! I so appreciate his down-to-earth and often humorous approach, with common-sense ideas for teaching our young children to manage their emotions, not just modify their behavior.

Vicki B.



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Ten DOs & DON'Ts for meltdowns

Your child is melting down in your living room or in aisle three at Target, and you don't know why. You are bombarded with a flood of emotions: embarrassment, anger, resentment, and confusion. You don't have time for this! And after all, there's really no reason for this outburst.

My family and I have helped over 1,500 kids through the process of learning emotional self-control, impulse control, social skills, and more. We see it all the time—when children get upset, it's like they are emotionally “on fire.” It's hard to reason with them during this time, and reacting immediately—which parents are prone to do—only inflames the situation. Our first goal, rather, should be to put out that emotional fire. Only then can we address consequences and expect contrition.

So the next time your child throws a tantrum (probably today in the middle of your homeschooling day!), here are five DON'Ts and five DO's for you to practice.

5 THINGS NOT TO DO

1. Don't react. If you react to your upset child by getting upset yourself, you are perpetuating the cycle. You are adding fuel to the fire. Our job is to respond with confidence, not to react with emotion.

2. Don't make eye contact. When kids feel out of control emotionally, they get embarrassed and feel ashamed. Looking them in the eyes only furthers this shame and inflames the situation more.

3. Don't try to reason with them. It won't work. Asking your child to “use their words” is fruitless because they cannot process language when upset. Don't dismiss their concerns, either—do you like it when your spouse says “It's no big deal” or “There's no reason to be upset” to you? Didn't think so! Timeouts are okay but often don't work, because sitting and thinking about why you are upset often makes you even more angry!

4. Don't talk a lot. Have you ever noticed that the more you talk, the more upset your child becomes? That's because when you get flustered and keep talking, the anxiety and uncertainty in your voice actually makes the situation more unstable.

5. Don't give consequences while your child is still upset. “If you don't stop this meltdown right now, I'm going to take away all your video games!” That only makes things worse.

Instead, lead your child to a calm place. Then you'll get something even better than a forced apology—you'll get contrition. Do you know what's even better than consequences for overreacting to frustration? Teaching your child how to handle frustration better next time.

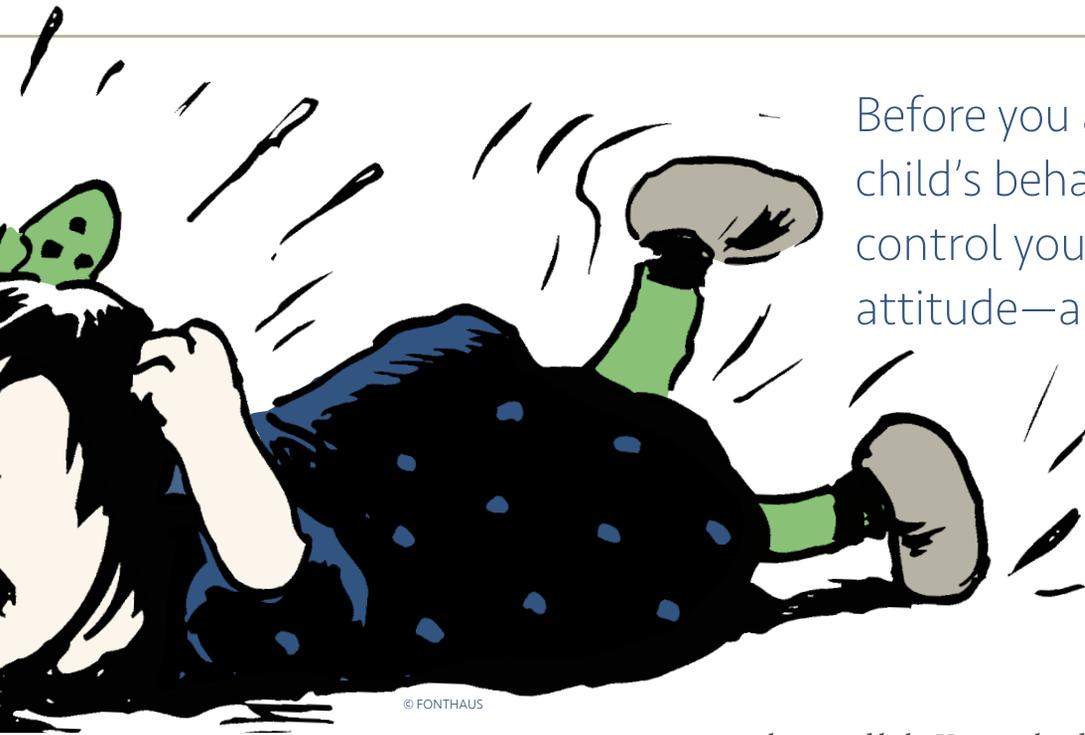
5 THINGS TO DO

1. Sit down. Before you address your child's behavior, always control your own behavior and attitude—and even posture—first. If you jump prematurely into a lecture or



by KIRK MARTIN

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threat, you will add fuel to the fire and end up throwing your own tantrum. Sitting down relaxes you and communicates that you are in control of yourself and the situation.

Their behavior should not influence your behavior. Sitting means you aren't going to yell, and have time

to listen and help. You are also doing something else without realizing it—you are leading your child to a calm place by modeling appropriate behavior.

2.

Use an even, non-emotional, matter-of-fact tone that says everything is okay. This communicates confidence and self-control—even if your child doesn't have either! To kids, this sort of tone is settling.

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3.

Acknowledge your child's frustration.

"I can tell you're really frustrated or disappointed. I'd be upset, too."

When a child (or spouse!) feels understood, it is very calming. You could even say, "You know, that doesn't sound like you. It sounds like frustration or anxiety or hunger to me."

You are separating the behavior from the person, and identifying the root of the meltdown. This also helps you and your child focus on the real issue—it's not the meltdown that's the problem, it's the frustration over some situation that caused it.

4.

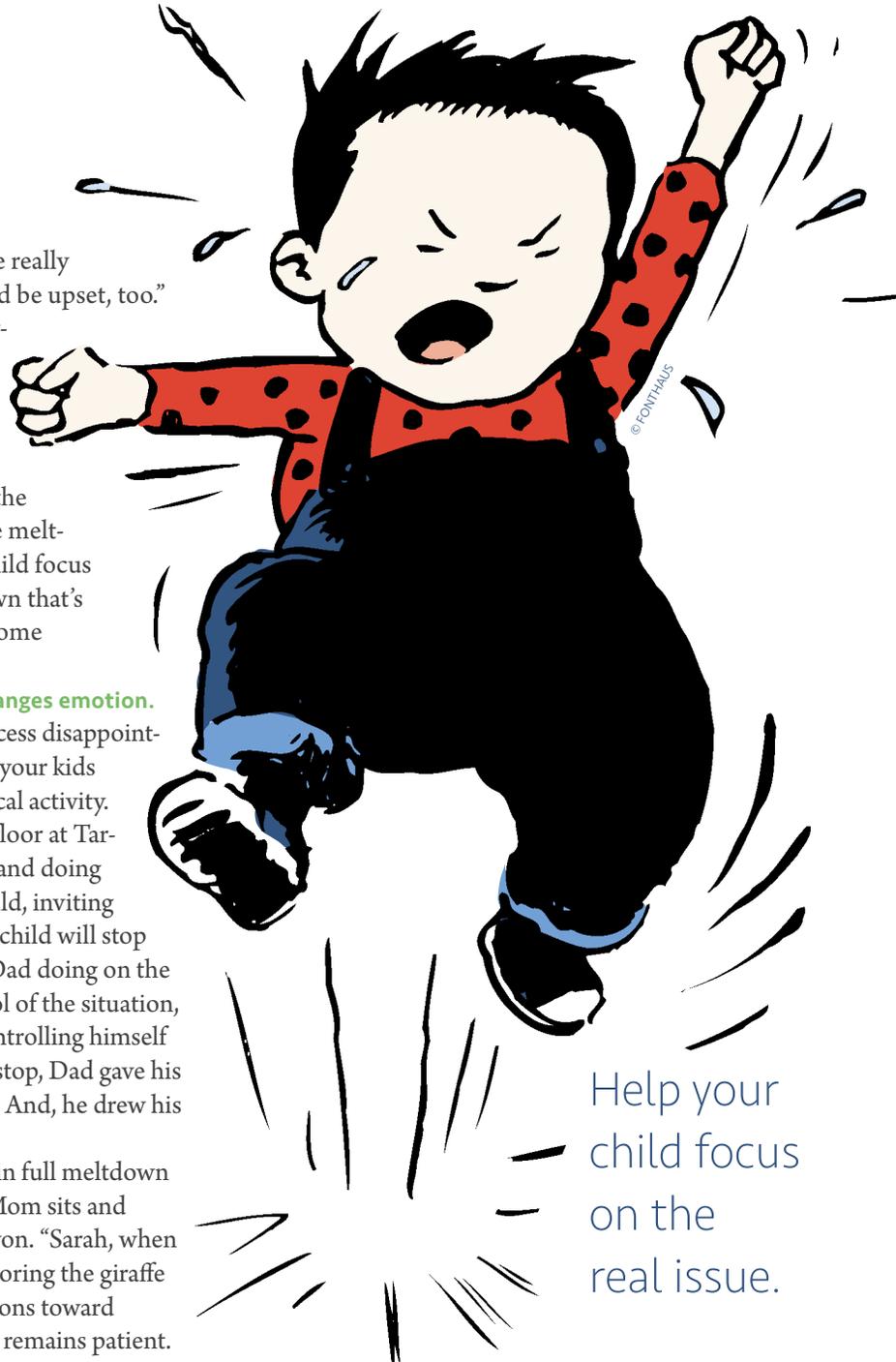
Remember that motion changes emotion.

Movement helps a child process disappointment and frustration. So get your kids moving with a specific, physical activity.

Picture your toddler wailing on the floor at Target. Now picture Dad dropping down and doing pushups right next to the wriggling child, inviting the child to join him. I guarantee your child will stop his meltdown and think, "What's my Dad doing on the floor?!" Dad has just taken back control of the situation, not by controlling the child, but by controlling himself first. Instead of yelling for the child to stop, Dad gave his son something to do that was physical. And, he drew his child to his calm place.

Mom is in the kitchen while Sarah's in full meltdown mode. Instead of yelling or pleading, Mom sits and begins to color while holding up a crayon. "Sarah, when you're ready, I could use some help coloring the giraffe on Noah's Ark." Mom slides some crayons toward Sarah without making eye contact and remains patient. She's going to lead her daughter to a calm place.

Giving kids something tactile to play or build with can be effective. "Jacob, I can tell you're frustrated. Go dump your Legos out and in 23 seconds, I'll come build a spaceship with you." See, the child doesn't know how to



Help your child focus on the real issue.

"calm down," but he does know how to build a spaceship. And that is calming.

5.

Practice a calm routine.

Seriously. We practice vocabulary words and math facts. When was the last time you practiced a specific action to take next time your kids are upset, frustrated or disappointed? Do it again and again, 100 times. Do it at Target and the grocery store until this becomes the new tradition in your home. "When we get upset, we color. We do eight pushups. We listen to music."

The quickest way to change your child's behavior is to first control your own. Lead your child to a calm place by modeling how to handle your own frustration. Remember that you're teaching your child life-long skills. ■

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Questions? HSLDA preschool member benefits include phone and email consultation with Vicki Bentley, Stacey Wolking, and our struggling learner consultants at 540-338-5600.