What to say when your three-year-old melts down

"My three-year-old is screaming on the floor over a fallen block tower and "calm down" isn't landing. What do I actually say?"

TAKE 1 · THE INSTINCT

"Calm down."

"Calm down" asks a three-year-old mid-meltdown to stop a feeling they do not yet have the words for. Naming the feeling for them is one of the steps emotion-coaching programs teach parents, and it is small enough to say while the blocks are still rolling across the floor.

Why naming comes first

A 2023 review pooled fifteen randomized trials of programs that coach parents in how they respond to their children's feelings. The children were between eighteen months and just under seven, so a three-year-old sits inside the studied range. Children whose parents were trained showed a small-to-moderate gain in emotional competence compared with children whose parents were not. That is a skill parents can learn, not a personality trait.

TAKE 2 · TRY THIS INSTEAD

"You're furious. The tower fell."

A 2026 diary study followed preschoolers in China (about five years old on average) day by day for two weeks. On the days a child put feelings into words more, that child recovered from upsets faster. It is a link in one group of children, not proof of cause, and it says nothing about any single evening.

What the words do

Take 2 has one feeling and one fact. "You're furious" is a word your child can borrow. "The tower fell" is true and takes no side. Nothing in it promises to rebuild the tower, and nothing asks your child to stop.

Then stay close and wait. The waiting is the hard part. If the crying climbs for a moment after you name it, keep going. Keep your voice lower than your child's, and say the same sentence again rather than reaching for a new one. When the breathing changes, the fixing can start.

If you live in two homes

The sentence is short enough to travel. Tell the other adult the shape, not a philosophy: one feeling, one fact, then wait. The tower, the cup or the shoe can differ in each home; the first sentence your child hears should not. If the other parent says "calm down" instead, you can still use the words on your nights. You do not need agreement to start.

In the UK

The NHS page on temper tantrums suggests the same thing: stay calm and name the feeling ("I know you're feeling angry about…"). If you are seriously worried about your child's behaviour, or your child seems to lose skills they had, talk to your health visitor or GP. In England and Wales, a child arrangements order may set out who a child lives with and when they spend time with each parent (older orders say "residence" and "contact"). Cafcass in England (Cafcass Cymru in Wales) advises the family court about what is safe for children; for everyday parenting questions, Coram Family Lives (England and Wales, 0808 800 2222) is free and confidential. Nothing on this page is legal advice.

Sources

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This is general information drawn from published research and pediatric guidance. It is not medical, psychological or legal advice. If you are worried about your child, talk to your doctor.