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

"My six-year-old loses it over something small, I say "calm down," and it doesn't land. What do I say instead?"

TAKE 1 · THE INSTINCT

"Calm down."

TAKE 2 · TRY THIS INSTEAD

"You're furious. The tower fell."

At six, "calm down" is an instruction. Naming the feeling first is one of the steps emotion-coaching programs teach parents, and it fits in a sentence you can say at the kitchen door.

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 ranged from eighteen months to just under seven, so five- and six-year-olds sit inside the studied range and seven-year-olds sit just outside it. Children whose parents were trained showed a small-to-moderate gain in emotional competence compared with children whose parents were not.

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. One group of children, a link rather than proof of cause, and nothing it says is about a single evening.

What the words do

Take 2 is one feeling and one fact. "You're furious" hands your child a word they can agree with or correct. "The tower fell" is simply true. It takes no side and makes no promise.

Then stay close and wait. If the crying climbs for a moment, keep going. Keep your voice lower than your child's and say the same sentence again. When the breathing changes, you can ask what they want to do about the tower.

If you live in two homes

You cannot make the other home match, and you do not need to: you can use the sentence on your nights on your own. If you can share one thing with the other adult, share the shape rather than the theory: name the feeling first, keep the limit, then wait. Swap "the tower fell" for whatever actually happened there.

In the UK

The NHS advice on child behaviour also says to stay calm and not overreact. If you are struggling, or your child's behaviour is upsetting the whole family, talk to your GP or school nurse. 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.