



## Teaching Children to Think before Acting

A child's immediate reaction to criticism or unkind words and actions can be inappropriate. Teaching children to respond to difficult situations with appropriate words and behaviors is difficult, but important for successful social interactions and relationships. This article includes strategies to help children think before acting.

**1. Take a Time Out** – Taking a break from a situation allows children to gather their thoughts before speaking or acting. Teach children to take time to think about a response. The time out can be as short as counting to ten, saying the alphabet, or removing themselves from the area for a few minutes. Taking a break to gather their thoughts and emotions is the initial step in responding appropriately to difficult situations.

**2. Think about the Situation** - Sometimes children misunderstand the jokes, comments, or actions of other people. Teach children to review situations and ask themselves questions. For example: Was the comment/action directed at me? Could it have been a joke? Is this person usually unkind or critical or could they be having a bad day? What did their body language say (i.e. Were they smiling as if joking? or Were they looking at someone else)? Was this person telling me about a rule or something to keep me safe?



From *Feeling Frustrated*

**3. Have a Strategy for Energy** – If a child's response to difficult situations is to act out physically, create a safe and appropriate way for them to use their energy. Squeezing a small stress ball in their pocket can relieve energy and give children something to focus on while thinking about the situation. If they need to take a break, teach them to take a short walk (going to the restroom, returning books at the library, walking the dog at home), push on a wall, or bounce on a trampoline if available. These strategies are positive ways to use energy while giving children time to review the situation and think of an appropriate response.

**4. Have a Phrase Ready** - Teach children to excuse themselves or respond to difficult situations with a set line that allows them to address the situation initially while remaining calm. A simple, 'Excuse me,' or 'That wasn't very nice' are polite responses that allow the child to take a break, think about things, and determine an appropriate response to the situation. Discuss when and how to use the phrase. Also, take the time to practice this strategy so children are prepared when difficult situations arise.

**5. Role Play** - Model and practice responses to different situations with role play. Use examples of situations that may happen or already have happened. Practicing difficult situations when children are calm provides the opportunity to discuss options and consequences. Have children demonstrate the words and actions that are good responses to the situations. Example scenarios include: Someone cutting in line; Being called a name; Someone bumping the child; A friend making a joke; Someone saying something about the child's art work or how they play sports; A classmate taking something the child owns.

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