

# EMOTIONAL REGULATION

## Steps for Teaching a "Self-Calming Break"

Tantrum behavior is a common struggle for children with PWS. Many children with PWS struggle with developmental delays in many areas, including speech. As a result, they may rely upon tantrum behavior to communicate their wants and needs when their words are not sufficient. Additionally, children with PWS are often impulsive and can escalate quickly. A small, seemingly inconsequential trigger can result in a rapid escalation to a full-blown tantrum.

Once upset, children with PWS can take a very long time to calm down and are often persistent in obsessing over the trigger that predisposed the tantrum. Children with PWS can at times fail to learn emotional regulation skills unless explicitly taught. Reducing tantrum behavior in PWS usually requires coming at the problem from several different angles.

There are a number of different strategies to choose from that can be adapted to all ages. It's important to allow your child to take the lead in choosing a calming strategy – this type of self-management and self-selection of a replacement behavior allows children to take ownership and establish control of their own behaviors. Because children with PWS can at times be resistant to or defiant of adult instructions, allowing your child to select a calming strategy that works for them can increase their initial buy-in.

**Here are some options you can give your child:**

- Taking deep breaths.
- Counting forwards or backwards slowly.
- Taking a walk in a safe location.
- Engaging in a solitary sensory activity such as squeezing a stress ball, stringing beads on a string, tightening and relaxing muscles, or using his or her fingers to trace his or her hand.
- Engaging in a solitary, mildly preferred activity such as sorting or coloring.
- Find a mindfulness or meditation video or recording and complete it with your child.

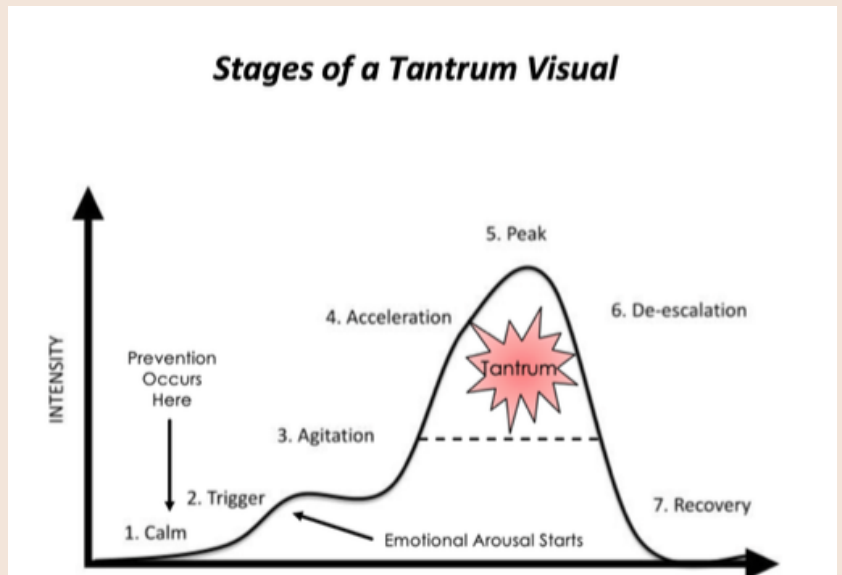
This is not an exhaustive list of calming strategies, but it gives you an idea of the types of activities that may be beneficial. Regardless of what your child chooses, it's important to have a clear structure and set of instructions for practicing these skills.

Because individuals with PWS tend to show persistent perseveration on a topic, taking time to step away from an issue can help ensure your child is truly calm. Trying to re-address the topic of a tantrum, or even trying to redirect before your child is truly calm can result in your child re-escalating into tantrum behavior.

There are a series of phases of emotional escalation that vary in intensity. A calm child experiences some type of trigger, which results in emotional arousal. If your child is not able to self-regulate his or her emotions, he or she continues to become agitated and can begin to engage in tantrum behavior. Children with PWS can have long and intense tantrums. Once your child passes the agitation phase, he or she escalates tantrum behavior until he or she reaches the peak of the tantrum. The peak of tantrum behavior is usually the most intense point. Following the peak of the tantrum, your child begins to de-escalate, but is likely to still engage in tantrum behavior until he or she reaches the recovery phase and begins to regain true calm.

### **Calm**

When your child is calm, there are several steps you can take. First, it is a good idea to practice the self-calming strategies your child selected while your child is calm so that they know exactly what to do when they get upset. First, review the instructions. Explain to your child what he or she needs to do. For example, if you are teaching your child to take deep breaths, explain that you want them to breathe in through their nose for three seconds, and out through their mouth for three seconds. Next, model the behavior. Show them exactly what you want them to do. Have your child rehearse the skill several times and provide them feedback. Be sure to praise and tell them how proud you are of them. It's important for your child to be proud of and to want to engage in these calming skills.



### **Trigger**

After a trigger has occurred is a good time to prompt your child to use their communication skills. Often you will know what triggers your child's tantrums, and you can therefore prompt them to communicate their needs as a means to remove the motivation to have a tantrum. In cases where you can give your child what he or she wants (e.g., if they need help building a toy, doing their homework, or otherwise are requesting something reasonable and accessible), prompt the needed communication response and honor their request, praising them for how well they communicate.

### **Agitation and Acceleration**

If you are not able to honor their request, give a simple explanation, such as "I know you're hungry. It's too early for lunch right now, but we can eat in 30 minutes." If your child begins to accelerate, prompt them to engage in their self-calming strategies. If your child successfully practices the strategies and calms themselves down, make a huge deal about how well they did. It's very important for your child to be reinforced for the effort they are making - calming down can be very difficult for children with PWS, and we really want them to be proud of this skill.

## Peak and De-Escalation

There will be times when your child does not successfully engage in the calming strategies and continues to accelerate towards the peak of a tantrum. Children with PWS often escalate very quickly from trigger to peak, so at times you may not even have the opportunity to prompt a communication response or have your child practice his or her strategies. Once your child is escalated, he or she is not in a place to learn and continuing to prompt the use of new skills, problem solve, or discuss the issue not only risks reinforcing the behavior with attention, but also will likely draw out the tantrum – the more your child can argue with you, the longer he or she will perseverate on the issue and continue to tantrum.

If you have tried and failed prompting your child to engage in their self-calming strategies, it's time to take a few minutes to step away and allow your child to problem-solve on their own. You can refer to this time as a self-calming break, or any other phrase that you prefer as long as it gives your child a clear indication that you both need to take a couple of minutes apart to calm down. A self-calming break is simply an opportunity to step away from a frustrating or upsetting situation and take a few minutes to allow your level of emotional arousal to decrease before trying to address the issue.

## Self-calming breaks look different for every age, but here are the basic steps:

1. Move to a calm, neutral, quiet area such as a bedroom or playroom where your child can have privacy. This needs to be a neutral space – in other words, not anywhere your child has been put in time out or sent when they were in trouble.
2. Let your child know that you can't help them when they're this upset, but that you can both take a few minutes to calm down and then try again.
3. Allow your child to remain in this area, away from other people while experiencing strong emotions safely. It's okay for them to cry, yell, etc. in this area without getting in trouble as long as your child remains safe. Give your child the space to choose an activity to do while in this calming space. This can include some of the calming strategies suggested earlier – some of the more soothing solitary activities such as coloring, or a sensory activity might be a better fit as they don't require prompting from an adult. Since prompting your child to engage in a specific strategy wasn't effective, we want to give your child the autonomy to select what they feel will work best for them.
4. Set a timer for a short time period, such as 5 minutes, and let your child know that when the timer goes off, it's okay to take more time to calm down, or to come out to return to normal activities if he or she feels calm enough.
5. After the timer goes off, **you want to praise your child for calming down.** Many children are accustomed to being in trouble after having a tantrum. However, because tantrums in PWS are often related to features of PWS itself, it is really important to pay attention to and praise the calming process, rather than reacting negatively to the tantrum. Remember that whatever we pay attention to we increase, so **be sure to pay attention to the big effort your child just made to self-regulate.**
6. If your child re-escalates, that's okay. This just means that he or she wasn't quite calm yet, and you can repeat the process, or try some of their other calming strategies.

## **Recovery**

Once your child has de-escalated and entered the recovery phase, you have a couple of options of how to respond. You can choose to let your child move on from the situation and get them engaged in an activity. This way you prevent re-escalating the behavior and allow your child to celebrate their success in calming down. If you feel like the tantrum was a teaching moment - in other words you would like to help your child, find a different way to respond in the future, you can role-play the situation to help your child practice an alternative response. Regardless, it's best to avoid discussing the tantrum behavior itself, and rather focus on what your child did well, what they could do differently in the future, and validate their emotions, and even discuss and validate your own emotions in the situation.

Remember, learning to calm down is a difficult and complicated skill! If you don't succeed the first time, keep trying. Learning to calm down requires a lot of trial and error, rehearsal, and practice. Also don't forget to meet your child where they are at. Sometimes we need to start with the tiniest of steps, and build skills from there. For example, for some people we may need to start with the ability to just take one or two deep breaths after an extended tantrum has occurred. That's totally okay! Meet your child where they are, and encourage small improvements over time to get to where you want to be. Also don't forget to have your child routinely practice their self-calming skill when they are totally calm. None of us learn when we are upset, so this skill need to be second-nature before your child will be able to easily implement it during an actual tantrum.

Best of luck! You are doing a great job!