

How To Recognize When Your Child Is In 'Emotion Mind' And What To Do.
A Child's Emotion Mind

Dealing with our children's emotions is a large part of our role as parents. We may think that we are equipped to deal with these emotions and that it will be intuitive, but when faced with intense emotions we may find that isn't completely true. This struggle can at times leave us feeling incompetent or unprepared. Learning how to deal with our children's emotions well is a skill that is developed over time, and with practice. It is a joy of mine to work with clients on these skills and to witness the transformation. Clients who are skeptical at first often become the biggest cheerleaders for these skills.

Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) promotes approaching life from a place of balance. In DBT, there are three states of mind: the emotion mind, the reasonable mind, and the wise mind. On one end of the spectrum is 'the emotion mind.' In this state of mind, one is highly emotional and prioritizes what they feel above all else. This can sometimes feel like being hijacked by emotion, which can make one feel out of control because their emotions are in charge. On the other end of the spectrum is 'the reasonable mind'. This is when one is approaching things from a matter-of-fact or logical place. Emotions don't play a part in this state of mind. The middle path, or the synthesis of these two opposite states of mind, is called 'the wise mind'. In this state of mind, one is able to address emotions, while applying logic and reason. This, you could say, is when you are able to think with both your head and your heart in alignment with your life goals.

These three states of mind apply to all people, including our children. Developmentally, our children spend a lot of time in 'emotion mind.' When our children are in 'emotion mind' it may look like yelling, clenching their fists, pouting, sulking, or avoiding. Oftentimes, children can become consumed by this state and struggle to communicate effectively. As parents, it is important to make sure we are communicating effectively with our children, and that means helping them learn the skills to get themselves into 'wise mind' where helpful work can be done.

The metaphor I use often in my practice is one of a house fire. If your house had a big fire in the kitchen, you would not start talking to your spouse about how the fire started, who started it, how it got this big... No, you would prioritize putting out the fire! Similarly, addressing your child's behavior and words while they are in 'emotion mind' is not as effective as putting the fire out. In fact, when we only address the words and behavior, we are probably adding fuel to the fire. This

has been studied by behaviorists, and research cautions against reinforcing the behavior by giving it fuel. Instead, we can encourage children to access their 'wise mind' by giving them space to let the fire die down, or by equipping them with the coping skills to get there.

Understanding what started the fire is critical, but it should not take priority over putting out the fire. The rule of thumb is, *when in 'emotion mind,' notice it, name it, and apply coping skills to the emotion prior to attempting to fix the problem.* Accepting the fact that your child is in 'emotion mind' is the first step to learning how to help them effectively cope with their emotions. This is important for both the child and the parent. Recognizing when we are in 'emotion mind' or when our child is in 'emotion mind' will reduce the chance of escalating emotions and ending up in those all too often power struggles.

When my daughter, Dale, was three years old, I started teaching her these skills. (Keep in mind, this is a process that will apply to teenagers and adults as well.) Dale would throw huge tantrums, which often involved yelling, clenched fists, and throwing herself on the floor. I knew that if I tried to calm her down with explanations, tell her that she was out of control, or issue consequences like not going outside, not getting dessert, etc. her tantrum would only get worse. When you give the tantrum itself the attention, it will only get bigger and louder, and you will unintentionally be reinforcing the behavior. Instead, I would start by noticing it: "Dale, you are in 'emotion mind.'" Then, I would describe it: "You are on the floor, yelling, with your fists clenched." Finally, I would tell her, "When you are in the thinking zone (or wise mind) we can talk about the problem." As you can see, this doesn't mean that you are ignoring the tantrum, or the child. It means that you address the state of mind and invite them to join you in a place where communication can be more effective: Wise Mind.

As she would calm down, Dale would sit in her chair with her fists balled up and proclaim, "I'm in 'thinking zone!" (Thinking zone is what I called 'wise mind' at the time.) I would use this opportunity to *shape her behavior* by naming the behavior I wanted to see her repeat. I would say, "Yes! You are off the floor. You are in your chair, and you are trying to talk to me." This is where I noticed and named the behavior. Dale was still angry, and early on I was okay with incremental progress. As time went on, I was able to say, "Can you open your hands and use a quieter talking voice?" This is the art of parenting, sometimes you have to give a little in order to get them where you want them long term. If I had demanded Dale to transition from a major tantrum to sitting in a chair having a calm conversation, my expectations would not have been realistic. That is nearly impossible to

expect of a child, of any age, until you have helped shape the behavior and reinforce positive steps along the way.

Keep in mind that these states of mind are fluid, and it is common for someone to jump back into 'emotion mind.' People can be hijacked back into 'emotion mind' by a tone, phrase, or any number of things. If this happens with your child, stop the conversation, regulate, and cope with their emotions, and then continue. It isn't productive to try to solve problems when you, or your child, are in 'emotion mind.' This can be a slow process and giving your child space and time are also key ingredients. Be warned, your child will not like the phrase 'emotion mind' when you have used it a few times, certainly not if it is overused. Be prepared to take a long-term approach with the practice of this particular skill. This process takes patience and repetition; emotional dysregulation is how children communicate. I would like to caution against rigidity. If these become dogmatic rules or demands, the process can backfire and make it difficult for your child to get out of 'emotion mind.' However, the result of a gentle application of this practice is a child who learns to regulate their emotions and communicates from a place of emotions AND reason.

Children are not the only ones who experience dysregulation of emotions while in 'emotion mind.' You can model the use of the phrase 'emotion mind' on yourself. Recognize your own 'emotion mind:' notice it, name it, and apply your own coping skills. This modeling will only reinforce the skills you are trying to teach your child. As a person who can easily react in 'emotion mind,' I often practice noticing it and naming it. My go-to coping skills are to step outside or go for a walk. It is extremely important that if you are leaving a child of any age, that you say, "I am in 'emotion mind,' and I will be back when I am in 'wise mind or when I am calm,'" or "I am stepping outside, and I will be back in a few minutes." Letting them know that, in no uncertain terms, you will be back is critically important to prevent children from feeling like they are being left or that they are bad. Starting this process of noticing and naming our three states of mind at any age is a game changer!