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Kids get frustrated. Stoic approaches can help.

Stressed and struggling

Many adults today are stressed and struggling as they cope with the global pandemic and its consequences. Kids, too, have a lot of reasons to be upset. Frustration comes naturally to kids, especially when they are stuck in their homes subject to new rules and restrictions.

Many children have spent months without the in-person support of peers, teachers, coaches, and extended family, and lacking their usual activities and classes. My own children are not little anymore and can understand the bigger picture, but it's still not easy for them. So I'd like to reflect, from a Stoic perspective, on kids' frustration as we continue to live under Covid-19 limitations.

'Proto passions' of children

Children are prone to what Stoics thought of as "proto passions"—involuntary emotional responses that arise from deep within. Young kids, especially those younger than 7, haven't yet learned the tools for controlling these emotions. They can't access their sense of reason effectively, so their strong feelings turn into "bad passions" much more readily than in most adults.

Parents sometimes call kids' rising emotions the "*red zone*." The intense reaction that leads to tantrums. This is not a teachable moment for any child. Words alone can't resolve these kinds of overwhelming feelings.

Fortunately, many of the Stoic-inspired actions/approaches for cop-

ing with anger for adults can apply to children, too.

Noticing the anger

First of all, the Stoics believed that to deal with frustration and anger, we need to first notice that we (or our kids) are becoming upset. There are physical signs that we can pick up on, and we can help children learn to watch out for. For instance, tightness in our chest, flushing of our cheeks, tenseness of shoulder muscles, pain in our stomach.

One of my kids began to pinpoint her negative emotions around age 7. She started to feel them physically and think of them as characters with names. They suddenly became easier to manage. (At around ages 7 to 9, kids begin to lay down the structure for reasoning in their brains, and these areas grow significantly at age 13.)

Simple stoic methods

Second, many simple Stoic methods for coping with anger are popular for kids today: Count to ten (or higher—Stoics recommended counting the 24-character Greek alphabet); take long, deep breaths, also known to children as "belly breaths"; use cognitive distancing to remove your mind from the situation temporarily, even just with a short distraction; or try physical distancing, to change the environment. Essentially children need a break to reactivate their reasoning mind.

Another lesson from Stoicism is to gently remind kids not to take things that happen too personally. This is very hard for kids (and adults!) Yet this

is a critical lesson, if we're to avoid a victim mentality. The idea: *Take back your own power* over a situation, rather than let it take over you. You control how you respond. For instance, if a kid is losing a game, she might think: "Other people are cheating. It's not fair." But in fact, she might just be having bad luck. This is how the world often works, too (although if you see genuine bias or prejudice, you should call that out).

Being a model to our children

So when it comes to frustration experienced by our children—especially older kids—we can offer Stoic guidance around building self-awareness and taking a break or returning to reason. Reminders that we *can* handle our frustration calmly, and modeling how to do so, provide a healthy reality check to kids who often view their problems as insurmountably huge.



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