

How to stay calm – the ultimate guide for parents

Want to stay calm as a parent? Wondering how to keep calm when your child is losing it? Or if the kids are fighting (again)?

I'm pulling back the curtain to show you the tool kit I've been building over the years. Presenting you **The Ultimate Guide for Parents to Staying Calm**.

These are all the things I've learned from my Montessori training, from working in a Montessori classroom for over 10 years, as well as from being in the trenches raising my own two children (both now teenagers).

It turns out feeling calm is important to me. I feel peaceful in this place and better able to parent my children.

We all know it never seems to help when you get angry at your kids. It just seems to add fuel to the fire. An explosive combination.

Let's look for a more peaceful approach – let's see how to stay calm, and parent from there.



HOW TO STAY CALM

THE ULTIMATE GUIDE
FOR PARENTS

by Simone Davies
of The Montessori Notebook



1. Staying calm is possible when you start the day right

I've always liked to wake up half an hour before the rest of the house stirs to get myself ready. Some time to think and do the ablutions without being interrupted every few minutes. Especially important as I like to attend to my needs as an introvert.

I know it's difficult to predict when the kids will wake up so this routine could also be done in the evening after the kids are in bed, if you find that more relaxing.

Want to see what more morning routine looks like?

1. My alarm goes off at 6:25am. I hit snooze twice and get up at 6:35am. Seriously. I know you are meant to jump straight out of bed. But I know I love those last few minutes so just factor that into the timing.
2. I turn on my phone and read blogs and Instagram for 10 minutes. Again, a major fail. But I am so addicted to technology that this is a good incentive for me to wake me up.
3. Meditate for 10-15 minutes – ideally I would get out of bed to do this, but I lie in bed. I'd rather do it imperfectly than find barriers to me doing it at all. Mostly I just follow my breath. Observe when my mind wanders. Reset and start again to focus on my breath.

The thing I love about meditation is you can't do it badly. Your mind will wander. That's ok.

Sometimes I listen to a guided meditation. I like the ones from [The House of Yoga](#) (I got a special offer of €50 for a year). Many people like the [Headspace app](#), but I've not tried it myself.

I used to feel irritated when I heard the kids starting to wake up and moving around the house, sometimes coming in to ask me a question while I was meditating. Then I read some sage advice from Leo of [Zen Habits](#) (follow him if you don't – he's brilliant). He hears the sound of his kids and reframes it, reminding himself that these are the sounds of his family and he is so lucky to be a part of their lives. This tip worked brilliantly for me. If one of my kids flops down next to me, I'll just say, "I'm meditating. You are welcome to lie with me or I'll come to the kitchen soon."

I've been meditating since the end of 2014. At first I didn't notice a big difference. But after a few months, I noticed that my heart was racing less, I felt less reactive in volatile situations, and I could catch myself more when I was tightening up in my shoulders and in my back and release them. I once did a meditation and at the end it suggested you take a drop of that peace you found during the meditation. And during the day you will also be able to come back to that one drop of peace. I like to practice that at neutral moments. I'm even getting better when things cause me low-level anxiety (like waiting in a line when you are meant to already be somewhere). I'm starting to be able to have awareness of

how my body feels and breath into it. This helps me to stay calm. And soon I hope I'll be able to bring this into a situation when I'm triggered too.

How to start? I've been practising yoga on and off for 15 years so the idea of sitting still wasn't foreign to me. I found a class at [Delight Yoga](#) here in Amsterdam where you can meditate for 20 minutes at the end of the class. I learned a lot by listening to the instructions from this meditation and incorporate these ideas into my own practice.

4. I write in my journal. My dear friend [Deborah Reber](#) gave me a [Five Minute Journal](#) and once that was finished I now use one of the many notebooks from my collection and it works just as well for me. I've now modified the questions a little too. Always tweaking.

I write down 3 things I am grateful for. Sometimes I'm super specific (eg, "I enjoyed catching up with an old friend"); sometimes I'm rather broad (eg, "for stillness"). It just depends on the day.

Then I write down 3 things that will make today amazing. These are things that I have control over, rather than choosing something like the weather, or that someone will do something for me, or that I win the lottery. It can make a pretty ordinary day delightful. I might consciously choose to enjoy my cycle to work, or plan to do something with the kids that we enjoy, or perhaps it's just to treat myself to an early night.

Lastly I set an intention for the day. This might be how I want to be in the world or something that I'm practising. For example, "there is enough time for everything".

(The Five Minute Journal also has an evening section which I cover below *see #15 below*)

The brilliance of the morning routine is that you can live your life more intentionally. Rather than just reacting to everything that life throws at you. Since I have been doing this routine, life is not just passing me by. I'm living every day. Much more consciously.

2. Staying calm is possible when you are your child's guide

If you've been reading this blog for a while, you will have heard this before. What I love about being your child's guide is that it is difficult to get triggered by their behaviour once you adopt the role of being their guide.

1. Help them process their feelings

Rather than seeing your child as attacking you, your role is to help them through this difficult moment, to be their support, their rock, their guide. You don't even have to solve the problem. Just help them digest it, ask if they'd like your help, or help them to see

options when they are overwhelmed. My role is not to fix the problem, but to provide gentle leadership.

This applies as much for a baby and a toddler, as it does for a teenager. Let me give you an example.

Say your toddler has dropped spilt their juice and they break into tears. Rather than thinking they are giving me a hard time, first I guide her back to calm.

I would go to her and give her some empathy. "Are you sad that your juice spilled?" PAUSE and see her reaction. "You worked hard to make the juice and now it spilt on the table?" PAUSE. "It can be tough when things don't go as you plan." PAUSE.

We are putting ourselves in their shoes and not just naming the feeling but making guesses how it may feel or how you find things yourself when things like that happen. It doesn't even matter if you get the guess wrong. It will help them to clarify what they are feeling. An older child may be able to say, "No, I'm not angry. I'm just disappointed that Tim couldn't come to play today as we had planned."

2. Empathy requires practice

Use books like "[How to talk so kids will listen](#)" and practise using the phrases from the book until it feels natural. Or until you find a way to say it in your own words. It is like learning a new language and needs practice.

3. Help them back to calm

Some kids might let you put a hand on them or hug them to help them calm down. Otherwise I just let them know I'm here if they would like some help and make sure they are safe.

I'm waiting until their body relaxes, maybe they stop crying a little, and have some pauses between tears. Think "heart to heart". As [Dan Siegel](#) of "The Whole Brain Child" says, "Before we teach, we connect."

4. Once calm, offer help to solve the problem or help them make amends

Then once they are calm, I might offer help. Or help them to see what they want to do to solve the problem. "Perhaps we can wipe this up and go see if there is another orange to squeeze or something else to drink."

If they have hurt someone, or broken something, I would then help them to make amends. This helps the child to take responsibility for their actions without using punishment. For example, they could get a tissue for a crying child or check they are ok; or they can help clean a wall if they scribble on it.

5. Allowing all feelings

This is not just naming their feelings and hoping they will stop their tantrum. This is letting them have these big feelings.

I think in the most part we are largely uncomfortable with negative emotions like anger and sadness. We try to brush any negative feelings away, in our children and in ourselves. I find myself saying to myself, “You shouldn’t be disappointed. Be grateful. etc”

Actually when I lean into these feelings and I really feel where I’m holding them (for example, in my belly, my heart, my throat), I give them attention and 10 minutes later I often find they have moved on.

Let these feelings out. Let your kids let their feelings out. Be there to support them as they howl, throw themselves on the ground, and let them hear you say, “Boy, you really didn’t want me to say no.” Without solving it. Without wanting the moment to end. To allow it all.

[This](#) is a brilliant article about why we are scared of BIG feelings.

3. Staying calm is all in the preparations

Montessori teachers are all about preparing the environment for success. What this might look like as a parent:

1. If you are going to the doctor, planning to sit in a cafe, or doing anything where your child might need to sit or be quiet for more than 5 minutes, preparation is key. Take snacks, small toys and a favourite book.
2. Plan to go to the supermarket when you are fresh and not at 4:30pm when we are all out of energy.
3. **Planning less** in the day can relieve some stress. Make sure there are unplanned moments where your child will have time to play and explore.
4. Plan to spend time **outside every day**, rain, hail or shine. There is one thing I’ve learned from 10 years of Dutch weather and that is, “there is no such thing as bad weather, just bad clothing.” Put on some clothing to suit the weather and head out. The fresh air does everyone good and helps us to stay calm.
5. When things go wrong, make a note and sit down after the kids in bed (perhaps with your partner) and talk through what you could do next time.
6. Set up your home so your child can manage more themselves (see #9 below).

4. Staying calm means stepping in before you reach your limit

I think sometimes we are worried about being too strict with our kids. We try to channel some bohemian vibe and let our kids do things that make us uncomfortable. But before we know it, it has got out of hand, we are running around shouting at the kids. We let things cross our comfort level and then aren't able to stay calm.

It really is possible to give your child freedom within limits. Just recognising when you are starting to feel uncomfortable and step in then. Rather than crossing that line and losing your temper.

What it might look like. Let's say your child is throwing his food. You think, "He's just a kid. I'll let him play with his food." The next day the same thing happens. You repeat. Then later that week you have reached your absolute limit and rather than being patient, you threaten, you snap and you snatch away their plate in a fury.

Instead, you could see that after the first couple of days, the food throwing is starting to bother you. You show him, "when you are done, we say 'all done,'" and you can make the sign with your hands too. "Let's take your plate to the kitchen because we are all done." If he wants more, perhaps see if he is ready to eat without throwing. Otherwise I would repeat that the meal is over and the plates go in the kitchen. If he cries, you can be his guide (*see #2 above*). "Are you feeling sad that the meal is all done?" etc. But the meal is over and you can help him calm down and pack away.

For more on setting limits Montessori-style, you can read this post [here](#).

5. Staying calm comes from observing

Sometimes we jump in to fix things for our kids. We get emotionally involved and become an active party to the dispute. We break up fights between siblings. We stop our kids taking a toy from another child at playgroup.

In theory this is fine. However, it can help to observe a little longer before we step in. Allowing children to work things out for themselves.

Dr Montessori had rosary beads that she would count to stop herself from stepping in too quickly when a child was working something out. This could also apply when your child is working out a social situation too.

Sportcasting (popularised by [Janet Lansbury](#)) is also a great way to observe and stay at arms-length without getting emotionally involved. You can be like a sports commentator giving a running commentary on what is happening, "Jennie has the car in her hand. Jack is pointing at it and shouting. Jennie is wiping her eyes...."

And when things escalate, instead of stepping in to solve the dispute, act as a **mediator**. Be Switzerland.

In our classes, sometimes kids want to work together and sometimes they change their mind. I'm there to help them practice. I offer them words they could say, describe how each child is feeling, and help them to make amends when necessary.

That said, you know your child well. You know situations that are likely to trigger them. And sometimes we are able to step in just before things escalate out of hand. This can be an easier situation to deal with than when your child melts down over something.

It's trial and error when to step in. Keep observing. Keep trying. And keep adjusting until you find a good balance.

6. Staying calm is possible when we engage cooperation Montessori-style

In the Montessori approach, we use alternatives to rewards and punishment to engage cooperation.

As [Alfie Kohn](#) also says, "work with the child, rather than doing something to them."

When we bribe our kids or give them rewards to behave, these are extrinsic motivation. Something that comes from us. What Alfie Kohn calls "doing to". Time outs and punishment also fall into this category.

Instead, we want to find ways to work with them. It might be by using routines, using humour, counting to 10 in your head (to allow them time to process your request), using positive words, or saying "you wish you could..." instead of "don't...".

For my recipe for cooperation, click [here](#).

7. Staying calm by being present

One thing that has helped me to stay calm, is by getting rid of multi-tasking from my days. Mindfulness has become a bit of a buzzword these days. But it is not to be ignored.

When you do one thing at a time, you can be wholly present with what is happening. You can listen to your kids when they are talking. You can be less reactive as you take time to observe first (*see #5 above*). You can totally enjoy the ice-cream you are eating. You can take time to notice your partner. And when washing up the dishes you begin to see the beauty of the bubbles.

It helps you to see beauty everywhere.

In our Montessori training, we learned that, just as the classroom needs to be prepared, so does the adult. I think of this each morning in class as I put on my apron. I'm turning off my phone. I'm now just focussed on my classes. I'm present.

At home, I now find myself hiding my telephone in the bedroom so I don't check it too often when the kids are around. I make time to have meals as a family around the kitchen table. Every meal. And if I catch myself not listening to one of the kids, I'll apologise and ask them to start over. Rather than being frustrated at having to repeat themselves, I think they actually appreciate that I'm trying to be present.

It's still a work in progress for me, but there has been a huge improvement.

8. Staying calm is possible when we find a way to have everyone's needs met

Montessori is a child-focussed approach. You will hear us say, "follow the child." Or to talk to your child with the same respect you would to a colleague or friend.

What I think we forget though is that the parents have needs too. Ignore these at your peril.

When we are not receiving enough care or rest or aren't feeling fulfilled, resentment can build up. I promise you, no-one wants you to feel resentful or guilty, least of all your child or partner.

So be a **Montessori family**. Find a way that everyone can have their needs met. Explore what is important to you, to your partner, to your kids.

At first it might seem impossible to find a balance between these. So you put yourselves after the baby. But really there are hundreds of ways to solve problems when you think of constraints as beautiful. You just have to open your mind and be creative.

It might mean that your weekend might have some time together as a family, some time with each child, some time with the whole family, and some time when each parent has some time to themselves.

Even when the baby is small, the father might take the baby for a walk to give the mother some rest. Then the father might want to read some of his book or meet some friends. And sometimes you will find someone you both trust to look after the baby so that you can have some special time with your partner.

[Non-violent communication](#) is a great place to start if you are interested in starting this kind of dialogue.

9. Staying calm is possible when you set things up for children to be able to manage by themselves

I love the advice Susan Stephenson (experienced Montessori teacher and owner of [Michael Olaf](#)) once gave me when she was visiting Amsterdam. I was asking her how to maintain your energy when you are in the classroom. Her answer was to use the environment as much as possible to help you.

Susan talked about making a note each time a child asks for help. Then think, “is there a way that I can set things up so they can manage themselves?” For example, if a child asks for more paper to keep working, is there some way of putting out paper where they can help themselves?

Here are some more ideas:

1. Look for child-sized implements, for example, small brooms for sweeping
2. Use small baskets or trays so children have everything they need together
3. Only put out as much as you want to clean up
4. Have small hand mitts at the ready for small spills
5. Store things at the child’s height – for example, a basket with clothes to choose from each morning; their plates and glasses on a low shelf in the kitchen; a small jug of water they can reach to help themselves to a drink

10. Staying calm by taking preventative measures (self care)

When my kids were both under 2 years old, I ended up at the doctor. I was exhausted and super emotional. I thought perhaps it was something medical. The doctor listened to me, checked all my vitals, and sent me home holding a piece of paper. It was a prescription of sorts – a list of things I needed to do to take care of myself.

I have been following her advice ever since:

1. I take a bath every night once the house is quiet
2. I love to read books and allow myself the pleasure of reading fiction that has nothing to do with work. I also now help to organise a [book club](#) to make sure I keep reading
3. I have hobbies like films and crafting and make time to meet friends to do these
4. I have people to care for me – super important as parents are so busy caring for everyone else. At the moment, I regularly go to the osteopath for preventative care. And in the past I’ve seen a chiropractor and a psychologist.
5. Exercise – this changes over time for me. It’s sometimes yoga, sometimes pilates, sometimes running. And I love my bike to get around Amsterdam which keeps me active.

What about you? Think about things that you can do to help you relax and take care of yourself. Maybe you'll need to book a babysitter, call in a grandparent, or arrange a swap with a friends to look after each other's kids.

Do what you need to do. Do not miss this step.

11. Staying calm by channeling a role model

I was chatting to some parents in class and discussing how a Montessori approach to parenting can be very different to what they see around them or to how they were brought up themselves. And there aren't always many people living this way nearby you. So it can be difficult when you don't have a role model.

I have a dear friend Kirsty who is amazing with her children. So if I am feeling stuck, I just think "what would Kirsty do?".

Meet up with like-minded people, learn from each other, and take notes.

12. Staying calm by filling your child's bucket

It's true that some days it feels like you are just nagging your kids to get things done all day. When they are not being very cooperative. When they feel like they are giving you a hard time.

If this is you, it's time to do some connection building. It might be as simple as taking 5 minutes in the morning to snuggle in bed and read books. Going to visit the ducks on the canal. Taking a walk when the kids are in charge. Playing your child's favourite game. Tickling games after the bath. Laughing together.

There are opportunities to connect with your child during every day tasks like getting dressed and nappy changing. You can make eye contact and use rich language. You can smile and use gentle hands. You can breathe and slow down, and cherish even these ordinary moments.

And if you are already doing these things, keep it going.

This connection is your basic building block. It gives your child a feeling of being loved. So when you need to set a limit, they understand that it comes from a place of love. And you get to stay calm.

13. Staying calm by knowing the house rules

In my workshops, I often ask if you have any house rules. It turns out, very few people do.

House rules can set expectations, can help us to be consistent, and take away the stress of being put on the spot to make a decision.

That said, too many rules can be stifling, so just have a handful.

One of ours is to be kind to each other. This means that if the kids are teasing each other, I can always remind them that it's important in our family to be kind to one another. I haven't needed to tell them in a long time. So it helps to set the culture of the family too.

14. When you are no longer able to stay calm and have been triggered

It's inevitable that we are going to get triggered. That sometimes we won't be able to catch ourselves before we are shouting or angry.

That's ok. We are human. We get it wrong.

Here are some suggestions once you have been triggered:

1. Get help from your partner – get them to step in so you can step out and cool down
2. Take a deep breath and release it for the count of 5 – this is not only calming for you, your child can join you in breathing too. If you hold your breath after the inhalation and then exhale, this resets your system. (via [Margaret Webb](#))
3. Have a mantra or chant “OM” — print out your mantra and stick it on the fridge where you will see it
4. Think “I don't do that anymore” as you begin to shout
5. Shake your hands – let it all go
6. Splash your face with water
7. Make sure your child is safe and take yourself to another room – go to the bathroom, make a cup of tea. You might want to hang a note in the bathroom to remind you, “they are not giving you a hard time, they are having a hard time” (Original source: unknown)
8. Reassure yourself, “I am a good parent. I can handle this.”

If you lose your temper, use it as an opportunity to apologise to your child. You will be giving them a valuable lesson that we also get things wrong. And make it up to them. You are also modelling for them how you can calm yourself back down.

15. Staying calm by ending the day right

At the end of the day, take time to end your day as it began. Focus on the positive. Take time to restore yourself. And get as much sleep as you can.

Here is how my evening ritual looks:

1. If I remember, I have a quick look at the plans for tomorrow and shift anything that is not important to give space in the day
2. I turn my phone off
3. Have a bath
4. I write in my journal. Using the format of the Five Minute Journal again, I write down 3 amazing things that happened today. Sometimes it can be as small as having had something delicious to eat. Sometimes it's something I'll remember for a long time. And I write down something I could do better tomorrow.
5. I read for a bit and before I know it I'm zzzzzzz'ing.

Things I'm still working on

1. Sleep

I know sleep is important. I just have trouble switching off. I like the quiet once everyone is tucked into bed.

So this is an area I'm still working on. I'm now getting to bed mostly by 11:30pm. I would love to shift this to one hour earlier and maybe wake by 6am.

2. Equanimity

I'm embarrassed to say that I only learned about equanimity this year when I was chatting to one of my oldest and closest friends, Rachel. Equanimity is described as evenness. I am sure that the practice of equanimity from Buddhism (and other -isms) might also help to keep us calm and is something I'm hoping to explore further.

If you are interested in learning more, I found [this](#) great article.

3. Slowing down

I'm still guilty of moving fast, planning too much in my day, and having difficulty slowing down even in my movements. This is something that does not come naturally to me. But when I do, I notice the benefits.

4. Listening

I would love to be a better listener. I have a bad habit of cutting people off or, even worse, interrupting them to point out something with every intention of coming back to them but the moment is often then gone.

That is it. I hope that you will find this Ultimate Guide for Parents to Staying Calm a useful resource to come back to during your parenting journey.

I would also love to hear how you stay calm when things heat up. We are in this together.

If you also like to listen, I had a fun conversation with Debbie Reber [here](#) on the Tilt Parenting Podcast, "*Strategies for Staying Calm in Difficult Situations*".

To close, as parents we can only plant seeds. Accept kids for who they are. Lay the foundation. And be there to see those seeds grow. It's their journey after that and we are only a witness to it.

