

# Tears No More



by Mary-Ann Schuler

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b><u>COPYRIGHT AND TRADEMARK NOTICES</u></b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b><u>LIMITS OF LIABILITY &amp; DISCLAIMERS OF WARRANTY</u></b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b><u>AFFILIATE COMPENSATION DISCLOSURE</u></b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>WHY ARE CHILDREN IRRITABLE</b> .....	<b>7</b>
<b>WHAT MAKES YOUR CHILD IRRITABLE</b> .....	<b>10</b>
<b>HOW DOES A CHILD BECOME CALM</b> .....	<b>13</b>
<b>GUIDELINES TO MAKE YOUR CHILD BECOME A HAPPIER CHILD</b> .....	<b>19</b>
<b>REFERENCES &amp; RESOURCES</b> .....	<b>25</b>



One of the most disturbing psychological challenges of parenthood is a child who is chronically irritable, angry, and who explodes into temper tantrums.

In fact, anger and irritability are among the most common reason parents consult health professionals.

Irritability can have a damaging effect on the child's development, the parent-child relationship, and family life.

What's worse, parents become desperate in their attempts to calm their child.

And when nothing works, parents often feel useless and worry why their child appears unhappy most of the time. For the child, it is an unsettling experience

to be chronically unregulated when things like transitions to a new activity, getting dressed, or being bathed trigger a tantrum.

Usually such children learn to depend on their parents to soothe them because they lack [strategies for self-calming](#).

And because they are irritable most of the time, they may not experience pleasurable interactions with others.

There are many reasons a child is irritable or has problems regulating his or her mood. It is helpful for parents to understand what might be setting off the irritability, as well as learn ways to help their child learn to stay calm when frustrated or distressed.

This short guide will help you achieve exactly that by showing you an easy-to-read, easy-to-follow method to help calm your baby in a family-oriented mix of guidance, support, and efficient techniques.



There are several reasons why children are irritable.

Sometimes there are medical problems like chronic ear infections, severe allergies, or urinary tract infections that may make your child uncomfortable and experience pain.

A common problem frequently overlooked is intolerance to milk. Children who rely on a diet heavy in gluten (wheat products) or sugar products can experience frequent mood swings and become picky eaters.

Some children are born fussy and have a difficult temperament. Children with [a difficult temperament](#) are usually more intense, have a hard time tolerating change, and distress easily.

It may be hard for them to keep a happy mood for very long. In addition, these children tend to be less flexible when changes of any sort are introduced.



As a result, they often get angry, wishing that things be done exactly how they want them to be.

Perhaps the most common reason children are irritable is because they become easily overstimulated in response to sensory stimulation.

Basic experiences like face washing, dressing, noise on the playground, or a busy household can load their nervous system and create an internal state that can be overwhelming to the child and which can ultimately lead to meltdowns.

An inflexible child is often an irritable child.

Children who have problems with organization and planning often fall apart when they are required to come up with a new way of doing things.

In addition to getting overstimulated easily, these irritable children often get angry when they have to organize themselves to perform a complex task.

This problem is commonly associated with attention deficit disorder, executive functioning problems, as well as motor planning issues.

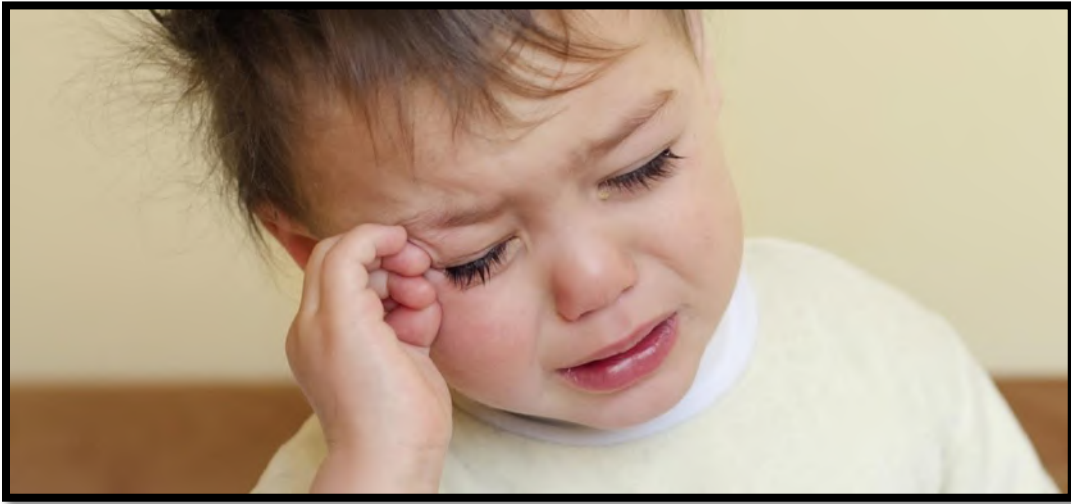
Finally, it is important to determine whether your child has a [mood regulation problem](#) that makes it difficult for him to keep a content mood.

Many parents worry about what this could mean for their child as he grows older. The truth is, it's very difficult to diagnose a mood disorder in very young children, but irritability is a factor in disorders such as anxiety or depression. As your child grows older, you may notice other things that point out to the

fact that there is an underlying mood problem that goes beyond a fussy, irritable temperament.

When the mood problems are unresponsive to typical solutions presented in this guide, a consultation with a developmental or behavioral pediatrician or a child psychologist is important.

However, an important aspect for parents to keep in mind is that what the child needs most is to learn how to self-calm on his or her own and to tolerate distress and frustration. This is a major focus of the strategy in this guide.



It is important not to overlook the impact that the parents' moods have on a child – it is not unusual for children with mood problems to have parents who also struggle with their mood.

There is also the genetic component. You may have a grandparent who had been diagnosed with anxiety, an uncle with depression, or you yourself struggled with a mood disorder your entire life.

If this is the case, it becomes even more important to consult with a mental health professional to understand if your child may have a mood disorder that makes him or her irritable.

When children are exposed to a parent who is angry, irritable, or depressed most of the time, they learn to respond to these strong emotions.

So even if your child doesn't have a mood disorder, he can learn that this is how one behaves.

The important thing is for you as a parent is to take care of yourself and [find ways to self-calm](#) and be available anytime for the difficult task of parenting.

### Common Irritability Causes

Can't fall and stay asleep	Overstimulated by sensory stimulation	Distresses easily	Allergies, medical problems	Reflux, eating problems
Poor organization skills	Overwhelmed by limits and change	Inflexibility and inability to adapt	Home life disorganized	Parent(s) angry or depressed

Sometimes, parents find that they are constantly walking on eggshells around their irritable child. They may be afraid to set a limit or impose a change of activity because they know their child is likely to explode into a long tantrum.

Some parents structure every minute of the child's day to keep them organized. But this technique can be double-edged.

By overstimulating the child or giving him one activity after the next in order to distract him can backfire, and cause the child to become flooded with too much stimulation, ultimately leading to an never-ending cycle of tantrums.

In scientific studies of irritable children with regulatory problems, experts found that irritable children express themselves through distress signals.

They may scream, kick, push, bite, and yell to let you know how they feel.

There may be very little calm discussion about things, or happy activity that fills their time. This state of chaos and intensity causes the parent-child interaction to become disrupted and thus everything becomes negative.

Sometimes, parents withdraw or disengage to avoid negative interactions with their child. Moreover, they may let their child play alone when they are happy and miss the best time to interact with them.



Every child has to learn how to handle his or her own distress.

Initially the parents calm the child.

As they read their child's cues and see what works, they come up with a set of soothing strategies that work for their child.

The child begins to mentally process these strategies and gradually takes over the task of self-calming.

The process of becoming a well-regulated person depends on certain skills.

The child also needs models in the environment for how to become a good self-calmer.

Here are some methods that help a child become well-regulated:

- When babies cry, it helps them to have a responsive, caring, and sensitive parent who helps them calm down. This gives the child the message that their basic needs can be met and there are ways to handle distress. This step requires that parent(s) know how to read their child's signals and gestures, as well as have a host of calming strategies at their fingertips.
- As a child matures, he learns to internalize strategies to self-calm. Consistent use of good calming strategies helps the child learn which ones to call upon in different situations. The child also observes others solve similar problems and learns when and where to use which strategies.

Calming strategies and environmental modifications are most useful when one anticipates what could go wrong and have things in place for that moment when the child needs them.

This leads to the importance of teaching the child to understand the precursors of irritability, to anticipate the onset of frustration and distress, and to use appropriate strategies that are available.

Self-calming depends on the ability to problem solve before, during, and after a distressing episode.

The child gradually learns a variety of ways to help himself organize and monitor his own actions and to tolerate various negative emotions.

To help your child become a thinking child, it is useful to help him or her step out of the negative emotions and be thoughtful about the sequence of events that occurred. Many parents say things like “I’ve told him a thousand times that when he falls apart, he needs to go to his bedroom and calm down, but he never listens. If I pick him up and put him there, he screams even more”.

The problem is that once the child reaches a distressed state, he may completely shut off his thinking brain and cannot follow the strategy that his parents are trying to teach him.

This is why it’s important to break the strategy down into steps so that the child learns a successful approximation of what may work.

For instance, instead of expecting the child to go directly to the bedroom, the parent may guide the child to go to a corner of the room and hug his body tightly while humming a calm-down song.





The idea behind this is to teach your child how to stop and think in the moment, then slowly move towards anticipating what could go wrong, remembering the strategy, and using it.

It isn't until children have the capacity to remember past events and reflect on what has happened that they are able to internalize and use strategies that might work.

This is when the child develops insight into his behavior.

Self-calming requires the child to decrease the state of arousal he experiences related to distress.

An adaptable child learns to recognize the internal state of distress and hyperarousal, then finds ways to inhibit the arousal through strategies such as closing his eyes.

A toddler may hold his hands together or put them in his pockets when told not to touch a fragile object, thus inhibiting himself in an adaptable way.

An adult struggling to master a very difficult task may take a break to refresh himself mentally and physically, thus avoiding an adult-sized tantrum.

Self-regulation develops through synchronized, reciprocal, and well-modulated interactions between parents and their children.

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