

A portrait of a woman with long dark hair, wearing a maroon top and large hoop earrings. The image is semi-transparent, allowing text to be overlaid.

GUIDE TO EMOTIONAL SAFETY FOR CHILDREN

*The Foundation of Healthy
Development*

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Guide to Emotional Safety for Children

The Foundation of Healthy Development

By Deborah Dzifah Tamakloe

Emotional safety is not a luxury. It is the foundation upon which everything else in a child's life is built, their ability to learn, to connect with others, to handle stress, and to become resilient, confident adults.

When children feel emotionally safe, they thrive. When they do not, everything suffers, school performance, friendships, physical health, and their sense of self-worth.

This guide is written for parents, caregivers, educators, and anyone who works with children. It is based on research in child development, neuroscience, and trauma-informed practice. But more importantly, it is written with compassion for the real, messy work of raising children in an uncertain world.

You do not need to be perfect. You do not need to have all the answers. You need to understand what emotional safety looks like and commit to creating it, even imperfectly, every single day.

Part 1: What Is Emotional Safety?

Definition

Emotional safety is the feeling a child has when they believe:

- Adults care about them and will protect them
- Their feelings matter and will be heard, not dismissed or punished
- They can make mistakes without being shamed or abandoned
- The world is predictable enough to navigate
- They belong somewhere and to someone

Emotional safety is not the absence of problems. It is not a life without stress or sadness. It is the presence of a secure relationship where a child knows, deep in their bones, that someone has their back.

Why It Matters

When children feel emotionally safe:

- **Their brains function better.** The prefrontal cortex, the part responsible for learning, reasoning, and impulse control, is more active when children feel safe. When they are afraid or stressed, that part goes offline and the survival brain takes over.
- **They learn more effectively.** A child who feels safe in the classroom and at home can focus on the lesson. A child who is hypervigilant or anxious cannot.
- **They develop secure attachments.** Emotional safety is the soil in which healthy relationships grow. Children who feel safe with their caregivers learn to trust others and to trust themselves.
- **They build resilience.** Paradoxically, children who feel safe enough to experience manageable challenges and disappointments develop the strength to handle life's real difficulties. Emotional safety does not mean protection from all hardship; it means knowing someone will be there when things are hard.
- **They regulate their emotions.** Children learn to manage feelings by experiencing safe relationships where emotions are acknowledged, normalized, and guided, not punished or ignored.
- **They develop healthy self-worth.** Children internalize the way they are treated. If they are treated with respect and care, they learn to respect and care for themselves.

The Cost of Emotional Unsafety

When children do not feel emotionally safe, the impact is profound:

- **Anxiety and hypervigilance.** The child's nervous system stays in a state of alert. They are always scanning for danger, unable to relax.
- **Behavioral problems.** Difficult behavior is often a signal that a child does not feel safe. The child acts out because they cannot communicate their fear or pain in words.
- **Academic struggles.** Even a bright child cannot learn effectively when their emotional resources are tied up in managing fear or stress.
- **Relationship difficulties.** Children who do not feel safe with caregivers often struggle with peers. They may be aggressive, withdrawn, or overly dependent.
- **Low self-worth.** If a child is repeatedly criticized, shamed, or ignored, they internalize the message: "I am not worthy of care."
- **Long-term mental health challenges.** Childhood emotional unsafety is linked to anxiety, depression, and trauma responses that can persist into adulthood.

This is not to blame parents or caregivers. Emotional safety is often undermined by circumstances beyond anyone's control: poverty, discrimination, isolation, untreated mental health issues, or the caregiver's own trauma. But understanding the impact helps us prioritize it and seek support when we need it.

Part 2: The Five Pillars of Emotional Safety

Emotional safety rests on five foundational pillars. When all five are present, children thrive. When one or more is missing, the structure becomes unstable.

Pillar 1: Predictability and Routine

What It Means

Children feel safer when they can anticipate what comes next. Predictability does not mean a rigid, boring life. It means that children can rely on certain structures, patterns, and expectations.

Why It Matters

When children know:

- What time dinner happens
- How bedtime routine works
- What happens after school
- How they will know if a parent is upset
- What the consequences are for misbehavior

...they do not have to spend mental energy worrying about the unknown. That energy can be used for learning, playing, and growing.

How to Build It

- **Create daily routines.** Not military drill, but predictable patterns: breakfast, school, after-school snack, homework time, dinner, bedtime. Children know what to expect.
- **Be consistent with rules and consequences.** If the rule is "no screens after 8 PM," enforce it most nights. If you sometimes allow it and sometimes don't, the child becomes confused and anxious.
- **Signal transitions.** Give children warning before a change: "In five minutes, we're leaving the park." "After lunch, we're going to the doctor." This helps their brains adjust.
- **Keep your promises.** If you say you will pick them up at 3:30, pick them up at 3:30. If you say you will play with them after work, follow through. Consistency builds trust.

- **Communicate what is happening.** When life is unpredictable, a parent is sick, there is a job change, the family is moving, explain it in age-appropriate terms. Children can handle disruption if they understand it.

What It Looks Like

A child wakes up, has breakfast, gets ready for school, attends class, comes home to an after-school snack and homework time, eats dinner with family, has a bath, reads a story, and goes to bed. Some days vary, but the basic structure is reliable. The child knows what to expect and feels secure in that knowledge.

Pillar 2: Attunement and Empathetic Response

What It Means

Attunement is the ability to read a child's emotional state and respond with understanding, not judgment. It is saying, "I see that you are upset. That matters. Let's talk about it."

Why It Matters

When a child's emotions are met with empathy, they learn:

- Their feelings are valid
- They are not alone in their experience
- Adults can be trusted with vulnerable things
- Feelings are manageable—they pass, and there is help

When a child's emotions are met with dismissal, punishment, or shame, they learn:

- Their feelings are wrong or bad
- They should hide what they feel
- Vulnerability is dangerous
- They are alone

How to Build It

- **Name what you see.** "I notice you are crying. That tells me something is wrong." This simple act of observation and naming is powerful.
- **Validate without fixing.** You do not always need to solve the problem. Sometimes a child just needs to be heard: "That sounds really frustrating. I hear you."
- **Separate the feeling from the behavior.** "I see you are angry. It is okay to feel angry. It is not okay to hit your sister. Let's talk about what you can do when you feel this angry."
- **Ask curious questions.** "What happened? Can you tell me more? How did that make you feel?" This invites the child to share and shows you genuinely want to understand.

- **Reflect back what you hear.** "So what I am hearing is that you feel left out at school. Is that right?" This confirms understanding and helps the child feel truly seen.
- **Stay calm when they are upset.** Your calm is contagious. If you become angry or overwhelmed when your child is upset, they feel less safe, not more.

What It Looks Like

A child comes home from school upset. Instead of asking, "What's wrong?" and moving on, you pause. You notice the tears, the slumped shoulders. You say, "I see you are having a hard day. Do you want to talk about it?" The child shares that a friend was mean. You listen, you say, "That must have hurt," and you ask, "What do you need from me right now?" Sometimes the child needs to vent. Sometimes they need a hug. Sometimes they need problem-solving help. By meeting them with attunement, you help them feel safe and supported.

Pillar 3: Unconditional Positive Regard

What It Means

This means that your love and acceptance are not conditional on the child's behavior, achievements, or compliance. The child knows, fundamentally, that they are loved and valued for who they are, not for what they do.

Why It Matters

Children who experience unconditional positive regard:

- Develop healthy self-worth independent of achievement
- Feel safe taking risks and trying new things
- Are less driven by shame or perfectionism
- Trust that mistakes are learning opportunities, not proof of their worthlessness

Children who experience conditional regard ("I love you when you are good, but when you are bad, I am disappointed") often:

- Tie their worth to performance
- Fear failure intensely
- Hide their struggles
- Become people-pleasers or rebels as a way to manage the conditional nature of love

How to Build It

- **Separate the child from the behavior.** "I love you. I do not love it when you lie to me. Lying is not okay, and we need to talk about it. But my love for you does not change."
- **Express affection even during conflict.** Yes, there are consequences for misbehavior. But the child still needs to know they are loved. "I am upset about what you did. I am not upset about who you are. You are a good person who made a mistake."

- **Celebrate effort, not just outcomes.** "I saw how hard you worked on that math problem, even though you got it wrong. That effort matters. I am proud of you."
- **Allow your child to have emotions without judgment.** A child who is angry, scared, or sad is not "bad." They are human. "Your feelings are okay. I am here."
- **Spend time together without an agenda.** Attention is a form of unconditional positive regard. Sit with your child, play, listen. No teaching moment needed. Just presence.
- **Apologize when you are wrong.** This is powerful. It shows your child that adults are not perfect, that mistakes are normal, and that repair is always possible. "I yelled at you earlier when I was frustrated. That was not okay. I am sorry. I love you."

What It Looks Like

A child struggles with reading and feels embarrassed. Instead of pushing harder or expressing disappointment, you say, "I see that reading is hard for you right now. That does not mean anything is wrong with you. It means you are learning something new. I believe in you, and I am here to help. And no matter how the reading goes, I am so proud of who you are."

Pillar 4: Safety From Harm (Physical, Emotional, and Sexual)

What It Means

Emotional safety includes physical safety, freedom from violence, neglect, or abuse. It also includes protection from emotional harm: shaming, manipulation, gaslighting, or rejection. And it includes protection from sexual harm.

Why It Matters

Children cannot feel emotionally safe if they are not physically safe. Trauma, from abuse, neglect, violence, or violation, changes the brain. It keeps a child in a state of hypervigilance and fear. Even if other pillars are present, trauma disrupts emotional safety profoundly.

How to Build It

- **Use non-violent discipline.** Physical punishment, yelling, shaming, and humiliation are harmful. Use consequences that teach, not trauma. (See Part 3 for detailed guidance on discipline.)
- **Protect from domestic violence.** If there is violence between adults in the home, children are not safe, even if it is not directed at them. Children exposed to domestic violence show trauma symptoms. Seek help if this is your situation.
- **Teach about body safety and consent.** Children have the right to say no to physical touch, even from family. This teaches them bodily autonomy and helps them recognize and resist inappropriate touch.

- **Screen for abuse.** Know who is around your child. Talk to your child about what happens when you are not there. Create an environment where they can tell you if someone touches them inappropriately or makes them uncomfortable.
- **Believe your child.** If a child discloses abuse, believe them. React with calm support, not panic or blame. Get professional help immediately.
- **Do not expose children to adult content.** This includes violence, sexual content, and adult conversations about trauma or relationships. Children's brains are not ready for these things.
- **Manage your own anger.** If you are prone to explosive anger, get support. Children in homes with chronic anger and yelling live in a state of fear. This is traumatic.

What It Looks Like

A child knows that their body is their own. They are allowed to refuse a hug from a relative if they do not want one. They know who trusted adults are and how to tell if someone is making them uncomfortable. They know that if they tell you something scary or painful, you will believe them and help them. They go to sleep without fear. They play freely. They are not walking on eggshells.

Pillar 5: Connection and Belonging

What It Means

Emotional safety includes feeling that you belong somewhere and to someone. It is the experience of being known, valued, and part of a community.

Why It Matters

Humans are social creatures. We thrive in connection and wither in isolation. Children who feel they belong:

- Have a sense of identity and purpose
- Feel supported in times of stress
- Are less likely to engage in risky behaviors
- Develop empathy and social skills
- Have people to turn to when they are struggling

Children who feel they do not belong often:

- Experience loneliness and depression
- Seek belonging in unhealthy places (gangs, risky peer groups)
- Struggle academically and socially
- Feel hopeless about the future

How to Build It

- **Create family rituals.** Regular family meals, weekly movie nights, seasonal traditions. These create a sense of "we are a family; this is who we are together."
- **Participate in community.** Join a faith community, cultural organization, neighborhood group, or parent group. Help your child see themselves as part of something larger than the family.
- **Encourage friendships.** Help your child develop and maintain friendships. Facilitate playdates, encourage school clubs, support their interests so they meet like-minded peers.
- **Tell family stories.** "This is where your grandmother came from. This is why we celebrate this holiday. This is how our family handles challenges." Stories create identity and belonging.
- **Show genuine interest in your child's world.** Know their friends' names. Ask about their day. Remember what matters to them. This shows they belong in your heart and mind.
- **Create physical spaces where your child belongs.** A place at the dinner table, a space in your home that is theirs, a photo of them on the wall. These signal, "You belong here."
- **Be present during transitions.** Starting a new school, moving to a new place, experiencing loss—these are times when belonging becomes precarious. Extra presence and reassurance help.

What It Looks Like

A child knows their family's values and traditions. They have close friends. They participate in activities they enjoy. They know their neighbors and community members. They talk about their future with hope. They know they have a place in this family and this world, and that place matters.

Part 3: Practical Strategies for Creating Emotional Safety

Strategy 1: Responsive Discipline (Not Punishment)

The Difference

Punishment is about making the child suffer for what they did. The goal is fear and compliance.

Discipline (from the word "disciple," meaning to teach) is about helping the child learn. The goal is growth and understanding.

How to Use It

When a child misbehaves:

1. **Pause.** Take a breath. Do not discipline while you are angry.
2. **Connect first.** "I see you are upset. I am upset too. Let's take a moment."
3. **Understand what happened.** "Tell me what happened. Why did you hit your brother?" Listen without interrupting.
4. **Name the impact.** "When you hit, it hurts. Your brother is crying. He is scared of you." Help the child understand that their actions have consequences.
5. **Identify the need.** Often, misbehavior is a way of expressing an unmet need. "You hit because you were angry that he took your toy. You wanted him to stop. That is understandable. But hitting is not the way to solve this."
6. **Teach an alternative.** "Next time, you can use your words: 'Please give my toy back.' Or you can get an adult to help. Or you can choose to let it go and play with something else. Let's practice."
7. **Follow through with a natural consequence.** "For now, you and your brother need some time apart. You will play separately for the next 20 minutes. Then you can play together again."
8. **Repair and reconnect.** After the consequence, reconnect with your child. "I know that was hard. I love you. You are learning. Next time, you can do it differently."

What It Looks Like

A child refuses to do homework. Instead of yelling or giving a lengthy punishment, you say, "I notice you are not doing homework. That tells me something is hard. What is it? The work? Your mood? Something at school?" The child opens up. You listen. Together, you problem-solve. Maybe the child needs a snack first. Maybe the work is too hard and you need to talk to the teacher. Maybe the child is tired and needs a break. You are not punishing; you are teaching and supporting.

Strategy 2: Emotional Coaching

What It Is

Emotional coaching is the practice of helping children identify, understand, and manage their feelings.

The Five Steps

1. **Recognize the emotion.** Notice and name what you see. "I notice you seem frustrated."
2. **Validate it.** Let the child know the feeling is okay. "It is okay to feel frustrated."
3. **Help name it precisely.** Is it frustrated? Disappointed? Angry? Scared? Help the child develop emotional vocabulary.
4. **Explore the cause.** "What caused you to feel frustrated?" This helps the child make connections between events and emotions.

5. **Coach problem-solving or coping.** "What can we do when you feel frustrated? We could take a break, go for a walk, talk about it, draw, or listen to music. What sounds good to you?"

What It Looks Like

A child is having a meltdown about a broken toy. Instead of dismissing it as "it is just a toy," you pause and coach: "I see you are really upset. Your toy is broken and that is disappointing. Tell me what you are feeling. Are you sad? Angry? Both?" The child learns to identify and name feelings. Together, you brainstorm: "We could try to fix it, get you a new one, or remember the good times you had with it." The child moves through the feeling with your support, learning that big emotions are manageable.

Strategy 3: Setting Healthy Boundaries

What It Is

Boundaries are limits that protect the child's physical, emotional, and psychological well-being. They are different from rigid rules. Boundaries communicate, "I care about you, and I will not allow harm—to you or others."

How to Set Them

- **Be clear.** "I do not allow yelling in this house." Not vague or negotiable in the moment.
- **Explain the reason.** "Yelling makes everyone feel unsafe. We use respectful voices."
- **Enforce consistently.** Every single time, so the child knows you mean it.
- **Stay compassionate.** You can enforce a boundary with kindness. "I know you are upset. I will not let you scream. You can go to your room if you need to yell, or we can take some deep breaths together."
- **Model boundaries yourself.** If you want your child to say no to inappropriate requests, you have to say no. If you want your child to protect their own needs, you have to protect yours.

Examples of Healthy Boundaries

- "I love you, and I do not allow hitting. When you feel angry, you can punch a pillow, squeeze ice, or run outside."
 - "You can have your feelings. You cannot have all your feelings on me. I am here to support you, and I also need to take care of myself."
 - "I care about your friendship, and I will not listen to you complain about your friend for more than 10 minutes. After that, we can problem-solve, or you can talk to your friend directly."
 - "I love you, and sometimes I need to say no. No is a complete sentence. It does not mean I do not love you."
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Strategy 4: Creating Safe Spaces

What It Is

A safe space is a physical or emotional place where a child can go when they are overwhelmed, scared, or need a break.

How to Create One

- **Designate a space.** A corner with cushions, a tent under the table, a room. Somewhere quiet and away from chaos.
- **Fill it with comforting things.** Soft items, books, art supplies, music, a photo of loved ones. Things that soothe.
- **Make it judgment-free.** The child can go there without explaining why or being interrogated about why.
- **Use it for regulation, not punishment.** Do not send the child to the safe space as a timeout. They should choose to go there when they need to calm down.
- **Create rituals for return.** When the child emerges, welcome them back calmly. "I am glad you are feeling better. Want to tell me what you needed?"

What It Looks Like

A child learns that when they feel overwhelmed, they can go to their safe space. It might be decorated with photos, books, a playlist of calming music, and soft blankets. When things get intense, the child retreats there, not to hide, but to regulate. They learn that they have agency in managing their emotions. When they return, they feel better and more capable.

Strategy 5: Modeling Emotional Regulation

What It Is

Children learn how to manage emotions by watching adults manage theirs.

How to Do It

- **Name your emotions.** "I am feeling frustrated right now because the traffic is making me late. I am going to take some deep breaths to calm down."
- **Show healthy coping.** When you are stressed, do not yell or shut down. Go for a walk, call a friend, exercise, take time alone, or talk about what you are feeling.
- **Apologize and repair.** If you lose your temper, repair it. "I yelled at you earlier. I was stressed, but that is not your fault. I am sorry. You did not deserve to be yelled at. I am working on managing my anger better."
- **Ask for help.** Show your child that adults struggle and that asking for help is a sign of strength, not weakness.

- **Celebrate small wins.** "I was angry, and instead of yelling, I went outside for 10 minutes. I feel better now."

What It Looks Like

A child watches a parent experience disappointment without shutting down or becoming hostile. Instead, the parent says, "This is disappointing. I feel frustrated. Let me take a walk and think about what to do next." The child learns that big emotions are normal and that there are healthy ways to move through them.

Strategy 6: Consistency and Follow-Through

What It Is

Children feel safer when they know that what you say, you mean. Consistency is not about being rigid; it is about being reliable.

How to Build It

- **Make promises you can keep.** Do not say, "We will go to the park tomorrow," if that is unlikely. Say, "We might go to the park this weekend if the weather is nice."
- **Follow through when you make a promise.** If you say you will be home at 6, be home at 6. If you say you will read a story before bed, read it.
- **Be consistent with rules and consequences.** If the rule is "no screens after 8," enforce it on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday. Not just when it is convenient.
- **Communicate changes.** If a routine will be different, let the child know in advance. "Tomorrow we will not have our usual after-school snack because we are going to a doctor's appointment."
- **Do not make threats you will not follow through on.** "If you do not listen, I will never take you anywhere again" is not a threat; it is a lie. Avoid this.

What It Looks Like

A child learns that when a parent says something, it happens. The parent says they will pick them up at 3:30, and they are there at 3:30. When a consequence is set, it is followed through with. When a promise is made, it is kept. This consistency is deeply reassuring. The child can trust their world.

Strategy 7: Meeting Developmental Needs

What It Is

Children have different emotional needs at different developmental stages. Emotional safety means meeting them where they are developmentally.

Infants and Toddlers (0-3 years)

- **Need:** Consistent caregiving, responsiveness to cries and needs, physical affection
- **How to provide it:** Respond to cries, hold and comfort, create routines, engage in play

Preschoolers (3-5 years)

- **Need:** Clear boundaries, simple explanations, imaginative play, separation practice
- **How to provide it:** Set consistent rules, explain why, play together, practice short separations

School-Age Children (6-11 years)

- **Need:** Competence, independence, peer friendships, understanding of rules and fairness
- **How to provide it:** Give age-appropriate responsibilities, encourage friendships, explain fairness, involve in decision-making

Adolescents (12+ years)

- **Need:** Autonomy, respect, understanding, peer belonging, purpose
- **How to provide it:** Give choices when possible, listen without judgment, respect privacy, support identity exploration, help them find purpose

Strategy 8: Addressing Trauma and Big Emotions

When a Child Has Experienced Trauma

If a child has experienced trauma (abuse, loss, violence, displacement), their nervous system may be stuck in survival mode. Emotional safety means:

- **Understanding trauma responses.** Behavior that looks like defiance might be hypervigilance. Withdrawal might be dissociation.
- **Seeking professional help.** A trauma-informed therapist can help the child process what happened.
- **Providing extra predictability and safety.** Trauma survivors need structure and reassurance more than other children.
- **Being patient with healing.** Trauma healing is not linear. There are steps forward and steps back.

When a Child Has Big Emotions

All children have big emotions sometimes. When a child is overwhelmed:

- **Do not minimize.** "It is not that bad" teaches the child not to trust their own experience.
- **Do not problem-solve immediately.** Sometimes the child just needs to feel the feeling.

- **Offer comfort.** Physical comfort (hug), emotional comfort (listening), or practical comfort (a glass of water, a change of scenery).
 - **Help them regulate.** Deep breaths, movement, time, space. Different things work for different children.
 - **Problem-solve when calm.** Once the storm has passed, you can talk about what happened and what to do differently next time.
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Part 4: Common Challenges and How to Address Them

Challenge 1: When You Are Overwhelmed

The Situation

You are stressed, tired, or have your own mental health struggles. You do not feel capable of providing emotional safety.

What to Do

- **Get professional help.** Therapy, medication, support groups, or coaching can help you manage your own emotions.
 - **Reach out to your support network.** Tell trusted people that you are struggling. Ask for help—childcare, meals, just someone to listen.
 - **Take breaks.** Step away when you feel like you might explode. It is better to pause than to yell.
 - **Be honest with your child in age-appropriate terms.** "Mommy is having a hard time right now. I am working on feeling better. It is not your fault. I love you."
 - **Model recovery.** Show your child that you are getting help and that things can get better.
 - **Forgive yourself.** You will not be perfect. You will lose patience. You will say things you regret. That is human. Apologize, repair, and do better next time.
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Challenge 2: When a Child Pushes You Away

The Situation

Your child does not want hugs, does not want to talk, seems distant or cold.

What to Do

- **Respect their boundaries.** Forcing affection teaches them to ignore their own instincts about their body.
 - **Stay present without pushing.** You can be nearby without demanding interaction. "I am here if you need me."
 - **Find other ways to connect.** If your child does not want hugs, maybe they want to play a game, sit together quietly, or go for a walk.
 - **Explore what is underneath.** Sometimes distance is a signal that something is wrong. "I notice you seem distant. I wonder what is going on. I am here if you want to talk."
 - **Remember that push-away is often a trauma response.** If your child has been hurt or neglected, they may protect themselves by pushing away. This is understandable. Be patient.
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Challenge 3: When You Come From an Unsafe Childhood

The Situation

You did not experience emotional safety as a child. You do not know what it looks like or how to provide it.

What to Do

- **Recognize this is not your fault.** You inherited patterns and wounds. You are not responsible for what happened to you.
 - **Get help healing your own wounds.** Therapy is invaluable here. You cannot teach your child what you did not learn.
 - **Learn new ways.** Read books, take parenting classes, find a mentor. New patterns can be learned at any age.
 - **Be compassionate with yourself.** You will sometimes respond to your child the way you were responded to. This is normal. When you catch yourself, pause and choose differently.
 - **Break the cycle.** Your children do not have to repeat your story. By learning and growing, you are creating a new legacy.
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Challenge 4: When Discipline Feels Impossible

The Situation

You do not know how to discipline without yelling or hitting. You feel out of control.

What to Do

- **Understand that this is a learned response.** You learned it from your own upbringing. You can learn something different.
 - **Take a class or get coaching.** Parenting classes specifically on gentle discipline can help.
 - **Practice beforehand.** When you are calm, rehearse how you will respond to misbehavior. When the moment comes, you are more likely to follow through.
 - **Build in pauses.** Before you respond to misbehavior, take three deep breaths. This small pause can prevent an explosion.
 - **Get support in the moment.** If you feel you are losing control, step away. Go to the bathroom, call a friend, sit outside. Whatever you need to regain control.
 - **Remember why.** Discipline without yelling or hitting is hard in the moment but easier in the long run. Your child learns better, your relationship is stronger, and you avoid the guilt and shame that comes after an explosion.
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Challenge 5: When Your Child Experiences Bullying or Peer Rejection

The Situation

Your child is being left out, teased, or bullied. Their emotional safety is threatened.

What to Do

- **Believe your child.** Do not minimize or dismiss their experience.
 - **Validate their feelings.** "That sounds hurtful. I am glad you told me."
 - **Help them understand it is not their fault.** Bullying is about the bully's issues, not the child's worth.
 - **Build coping strategies together.** Breathing exercises, self-talk, finding safe people at school.
 - **Connect them with supportive peers.** Help your child find at least one friend or group where they feel accepted.
 - **Involve the school.** Talk to teachers and counselors. Bullying should not be tolerated.
 - **Watch for signs of depression or anxiety.** Peer rejection can trigger mental health challenges. Get professional help if needed.
 - **Remember that this is temporary.** For children, social dynamics feel permanent. Help them see that this too shall pass.
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Part 5: Building Your Emotional Safety Action Plan

Step 1: Assess Your Current Situation

Reflect on the five pillars:

- **Predictability:** Does your child know what to expect? Are routines relatively consistent?
- **Attunement:** Do you understand your child's feelings? Can they express emotions without fear?
- **Unconditional positive regard:** Does your child know they are loved even when they mess up?
- **Safety from harm:** Is your child physically safe? Protected from violence, abuse, or shame?
- **Connection and belonging:** Does your child feel they belong in your family and community?

Honestly rate each pillar on a scale of 1 (very weak) to 10 (very strong). Where are your biggest gaps?

Step 2: Choose One Area to Start

Pick one pillar that feels most important right now. Maybe it is predictability because your family is chaotic. Maybe it is attunement because you tend to dismiss your child's feelings. Maybe it is safety because there is yelling in your home.

Choose one area and commit to working on it for the next month.

Step 3: Identify Specific Actions

For the pillar you chose, what are three specific things you could do differently?

Example: If you chose predictability, you might:

- Create a written daily schedule and post it on the fridge
- Set a consistent bedtime and stick to it
- Give five-minute warnings before transitions

Write these down. Make them specific and measurable.

Step 4: Identify Your Support

What support do you need to make these changes?

- Do you need therapy or coaching?
- Do you need childcare or practical help?

- Do you need community connection?
- Do you need to learn something (a parenting technique, how to manage anger)?

Identify what you need and reach out.

Step 5: Track and Adjust

For the next month, notice what shifts when you prioritize this one pillar. Are your interactions with your child different? Is your child's behavior changing? Is your own stress level shifting?

After a month, assess. If things are better, keep going with this pillar and then move to the next. If things are harder, adjust your approach or get more support.

A Final Word

Creating emotional safety for children is one of the most important things you can do. It is also one of the hardest, especially if you did not experience it yourself.

But here is what I want you to know: you do not have to be perfect. You do not have to have all the answers. You just have to be willing to try.

Every time you pause instead of yelling, you are teaching your child. Every time you listen without judgment, you are building trust. Every time you repair after a mistake, you are showing that relationships matter more than perfection.

Your child is watching. Your child is learning from you what it means to be human, to struggle, to grow, and to be loved anyway.

That is the gift of emotional safety. It is the foundation upon which everything else is built.

Protect it. Nurture it. And know that in doing so, you are changing not just your child's life, but generations to come.

This guide is based on research in child development, attachment theory, neuroscience, and trauma-informed practice. It is written for parents, caregivers, educators, and anyone who works with children. If your child is experiencing serious emotional or behavioral challenges, please seek support from a mental health professional.

You are not alone. There is help available. Your child is worth it.

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About the Author

Deborah Dzifah Tamakloe, MSW, is a Child Welfare Advocate specializing in the immigrant and refugee experience. With deep expertise in the Canadian legal system and West African communal values, she bridges the gap between clinical requirements and cultural heritage.

Deborah empowers professionals to move beyond "system shock" to build genuine equity. She provides the strategic tools and "Dual-Lens" perspective necessary to protect family unity while ensuring newcomers thrive within Western frameworks.

Part of her mandate is to support newcomer parents and to transform how agencies engage with the diaspora by replacing cultural misunderstanding with clinical strategy, ensuring every newcomer family has the tools to remain whole and 'system-proof' in a new land."

