

TOLERATING EMOTIONAL DISTRESS

What is this developmental skill?

Emotional distress tolerance is the ability to experience uncomfortable emotions without becoming overwhelmed or immediately trying to escape them. It allows children to stay engaged even when emotions are difficult.

How does this normally develop?

Young children borrow a caregiver's calm during stressful situations. As caregivers consistently comfort them, children gradually learn that difficult emotions are temporary and manageable. Over time, they become more capable of tolerating frustration, disappointment, fear, and sadness.

How can neglect interfere?

Without consistent comfort, children may experience distress as unbearable. They may panic, become aggressive, shut down emotionally, or avoid situations that trigger uncomfortable feelings because they never learned that someone could help them through emotional pain.

What might this look like?

A child may:

- Have intense meltdowns over small disappointments.
- Give up quickly when frustrated.
- Avoid challenging situations.
- Become aggressive when upset.
- Appear emotionally numb.
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Parenting Implications

Do not rush to eliminate every uncomfortable feeling. Instead, remain present and supportive while helping your child experience emotions safely. Statements like, "This is really hard, and I'm staying with you," teach children they do not have to face distress alone.

From Understanding to Attunement

Your calm presence teaches your child that emotions—even painful ones—can be experienced, understood, and survived.