

# Age-Appropriate Coping Strategy Cards

Practical calming and coping techniques organized by developmental stage

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## Toddlers (Ages 1-3)

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Toddlers can't yet name their emotions or use complex strategies. Coping at this stage is co-regulation — you are the strategy. Your calm nervous system helps regulate theirs.

### Physical / Sensory Strategies

- Bear hug — Firm, steady pressure for 10-20 seconds. Activates proprioceptive calming.
- Rocking or swaying — Hold child and sway side to side. Rhythmic vestibular input calms the nervous system.
- Blowing bubbles — Encourages slow exhale — the earliest form of breathing regulation.
- Water play — Running hands under warm water, pouring between cups. Deeply regulating for most toddlers.
- Squeezing playdough — Heavy work for the hands provides proprioceptive input and redirects big energy.
- Noise-canceling space — Move to a quieter room, dim lights, reduce stimulation. Sensory overload drives most toddler meltdowns.

### Caregiver-Led Strategies

- Narrate the emotion — "You're really mad the tower fell. That's frustrating." Simple labels build future emotional vocabulary.
  - Offer two choices — "Do you want to squeeze the pillow or stomp your feet?" Choices restore a sense of control.
  - Validate before redirecting — "I see you're upset" (pause). Then redirect. Skipping validation escalates the meltdown.
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## Preschoolers (Ages 3-5)

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Preschoolers are beginning to identify emotions and can learn simple strategies with practice and visual cues. They still need co-regulation most of the time but can start self-regulation in low-stress moments.

### Breathing Strategies

- Smell the flower, blow out the candle** – Breathe in through the nose (smell the flower), out through the mouth (blow out the candle). Repeat 3x.
- Hot cocoa breathing** – Cup hands around an imaginary mug. Smell the cocoa (inhale). Cool it down (long exhale). Repeat.
- Balloon belly** – Hands on belly. Breathe in to inflate the balloon. Slow exhale to deflate. Visual/tactile feedback helps them feel it.

### Physical Strategies

- Shake it out** – Shake arms, legs, whole body for 10 seconds then freeze. Releases tension through gross motor discharge.
- Wall push-ups** – Hands on wall, push hard for 10 seconds. Heavy work calms the nervous system.
- Animal walks** – Bear walk, crab walk, frog jump. Channeling energy into purposeful movement.
- Squish (pillow sandwich)** – Child lies between two couch cushions with gentle pressure. Deep pressure is organizing.

### Cognitive / Creative Strategies

- Feelings check-in chart** – Visual chart with face emojis. Child points to how they feel. Builds awareness before regulation.
- Draw the feeling** – Give paper and crayons. "Draw what mad looks like." Externalizes the emotion.
- Read a feelings book** – Books like "The Color Monster" or "In My Heart" build vocabulary and normalize emotions.

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## School-Age (Ages 6–11)

School-age children can understand cause and effect, use multi-step strategies, and begin to self-regulate independently in moderately stressful situations. They benefit from having a personal toolkit of 3-4 go-to strategies.

### Breathing & Body Strategies

- Box breathing (4-4-4-4)** – Breathe in 4 counts, hold 4, out 4, hold 4. Repeat 3 rounds. Activates parasympathetic nervous system.
- 5-4-3-2-1 grounding** – Name 5 things you see, 4 you hear, 3 you can touch, 2 you smell, 1 you taste. Anchors to the present moment.
- Progressive muscle relaxation** – Squeeze fists tight (5 sec), release. Work up through arms, shoulders, face. Feel the contrast.

- Cold water reset** — Splash cold water on face or hold ice cube. Activates the dive reflex, which slows heart rate.

### **Cognitive Strategies**

- Thought stopping** — Visualize a stop sign when a worry loop starts. Replace with a coping statement: "I can handle this."
- Scale it 1-10** — "How big is this problem? 1 is tiny, 10 is emergency." Builds perspective and proportional response.
- Worry journal** — Write the worry down, then write one thing you can control about it. Externalizing reduces rumination.
- Reframe the story** — "What else could be true?" Practice generating alternative explanations for upsetting events.

### **Social / Behavioral Strategies**

- Take a break (self-directed)** — "I need a minute" — then use a strategy. Normalize stepping away as strength, not weakness.
- Talk to a trusted person** — Identify 3-5 safe adults and friends they can go to. Practice what to say.
- Physical outlet** — Running, jumping rope, biking, climbing. Vigorous movement metabolizes stress hormones.

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## **Teens (Ages 12-18)**

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Teens have adult-level cognitive capacity for coping but an amygdala that's still maturing (prefrontal cortex isn't fully online until ~25). They need strategies that respect their autonomy while providing real tools for intense emotions.

### **Physiological Strategies**

- Physiological sigh (double inhale)** — Two quick inhales through the nose, then a long slow exhale through the mouth. One of the fastest ways to downregulate in real-time.
- Bilateral stimulation** — Alternating tapping knees, butterfly hug (cross arms, tap shoulders alternately). Engages both hemispheres.
- Intense exercise** — Sprint, heavy bag, intense music and dancing. Metabolizes cortisol and adrenaline directly.
- Temperature regulation** — Cold shower, ice on wrists, stepping outside in cold air. Vagal nerve activation.

### **Cognitive / Emotional Strategies**

- Cognitive defusion** — "I notice I'm having the thought that I'm not good enough" — observing thoughts rather than being fused with them.
- Values check** — "Does this reaction match who I want to be?" Connects behavior to identity and long-term goals.
- Worry time scheduling** — Set aside 15 minutes per day for worrying. Outside that time, write the worry down and postpone it. Reduces chronic rumination.
- Gratitude reframe** — Name 3 specific things that went well today. Specific > generic ("My friend texted to check on me" vs. "I'm grateful for friends").

### **Social / Lifestyle Strategies**

- Social media boundaries** — Unfollow accounts that trigger comparison. Set app timers. Don't check within 1 hour of waking or sleeping.
- Journaling (expressive writing)** — 20 minutes of freewriting about stressful events. Research shows measurable reductions in anxiety after 4 days.
- Creative expression** — Music, art, poetry, dance — non-verbal processing of emotions that may be too complex for words.
- Mentorship / peer support** — Structured groups, older mentors, therapy. Normalize asking for help as a life skill, not a sign of failure.