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Figuring Out How to Discipline When Your Child Has a Mental Illness

By Tricia Slavik (<https://themighty.com/author/tricia-slavik/>)

Contributor

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Figuring Out How to Discipline When Your Child Has a Mental Illness



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Your kid is acting out. Parenting experts tell you to course correct your child at that very moment. So you send Johnny to his room or Bridget leaves the birthday party early. It isn't fun or even easy but you must discipline them for their poor behavior.

When my daughter was 11 years old she melted down at her best friend's birthday party thrashing about on the ground like a toddler having a tantrum. The other children were terrorized, their moms shielded them. As I poured a sobbing Bridget into my car, my head was hanging low, knowing those moms will spend the rest of the party discussing my parenting skills and Bridget's nature.

Bridget isn't evil; sometimes she gets overwhelmed by too much stimulation and acts out. Within moments of her meltdown she is back to being a cheerful little girl.

Johnny lost it because he saw the peas touching the potatoes on the plate. The plate went sailing across the room and hit the cat. The whole family is in chaos, the night is ruined and you are in tears.

Johnny wasn't being a jerk. Johnny's obsessive compulsive disorder (<https://iocdf.org/about-ocd/>) kicked in, and he was fighting for his life. Peas and potatoes triggered his flight-or-fight adrenal system, and he did what you would have done if you saw a snake on your plate.

But you know what? Sometimes Johnny *is* a jerk, just like any 12-year boy can be. And Bridget can manipulate a situation to get what she wants, just like any 9-year old girl can.

So, how can you tell the difference? I have been walking this line for 14 years, and I still haven't figured it out. Often I can see it in their body language or their eyes. Sometimes when my daughter is overwhelmed with anxiety, she will get a far away look in her eyes and her body will stiffen.

But have I ever enabled her bad behavior, blaming it on her mental illness? You bet. Have I lost my cool when she was in the throes of a meltdown? Oh yeah.

The rules keep changing (*the hormone years!*), but I have learned a few tricks and strategies along the way.

1. I don't try to talk rationally when they are having a hard time. Johnny cannot begin to explain why peas and potatoes shouldn't touch. When things are calmer, I strategize with him on ways to prevent such an outburst in the future.

2. I validate their experiences. "I see you are really struggling right now," can go a long way in letting them know you are on their side.

3. I maintain my cool, if possible. Yelling or threatening would have only escalated Bridget's instability at the party. And I never want to model yelling as a way of getting what you want.

4. I show them unconditional love in the way I know they will understand. For some kids, it's a hug and a cuddle or alone time with you. But you know what makes your child smile. Wait until things have normalized, though.

5. I don't pretend it never happened. I believe that just because they couldn't help themselves doesn't mean they shouldn't know how their actions had an impact on others. I discuss how it made me feel, or ask the how they thought it made others feel.

Your ace in the hole? The love you have for your child. There will be days you will win and days you will lose, so be gentle with yourself – you are doing the best you can.

Tricia Slavik (<https://themighty.com/author/tricia-slavik/>)

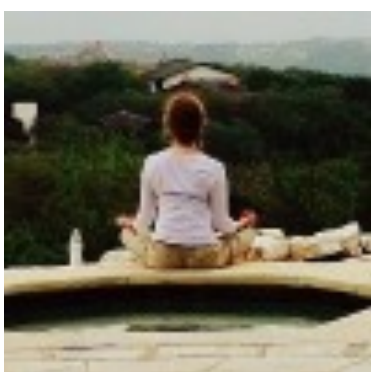


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