

## How to stop a tantrum before it starts

RNZ: Mary Argue

We all have big feelings, but for toddlers especially, it can all get a bit too much sometimes. But can you stop a tantrum in its tracks?

According to some parents, a game that teaches breathing through these big feelings is helping their kids to not throw their toys.



The Engage programme - a series of games and activities designed to help kids self-regulate - is rolling out across the nation's early learning services, with the goal of being in more than 2000 centres by June 2027.

While parents and teachers say the techniques are working wonders, education experts warn no approach is a silver bullet.

Barnardos in central Wellington has been running the [Engage \(Enhancing Neurobehavioural Gains with the Aid of Games and Exercises\) programme](#) since May.

Delivery manager Dianne Kabigting said the superhero breathing exercise is a favourite. The exercise involves mimicking a hero's classic gesture - such as hands on hips for Wonder Woman and shooting webs for Spider-Man - while taking deep breaths.

She said it helps the kids work through periods of heightened emotion.

"We explain to them that we use this breathing exercise when we have really big emotions, when you're feeling angry, frustrated this is a really good time to do this breathing... and then when it happens in real life we can coach them to do these breathing exercises."

It was a helpful technique, kaiako/teacher Tiara Lafeta said - especially before nap and kai time - because it was not uncommon for a room full of children to get "pretty hectic". The exercises also got a good run in the playground.

"When we notice that they're getting into a bit of a scuffle we ask them, 'What can you do to calm down a little bit?'

"The fact that they can talk back to us and say, 'We can do our superhero breathing'... [it] just helps them regulate their emotions."

It is not just kids taking deep breaths.

A mother - whose two-and-a-half-year-old son attends Barnardos - finds the deep breathing beneficial for her too.

She said when it comes to the exercises, her son had a favourite hero.

"He is obsessed with Spider-Man. We do that every time he needs to calm down or he's having a bit of a tantrum - which he does a lot of these days - and we find it really useful."

Psychologist and University of Otago professor Dione Healey created the programme and said it was an approach that had kids learning life skills through play.



"If you want them to learn to calm down or slow down if they're getting overly excited, or learn to persist a little bit more, for example getting them to complete a puzzle without having to leave halfway through.

"So you pick your skill and then you think about games that would involve that skill."

She said decades of research also showed self-regulation played a critical role throughout life.

"The [longitudinal] [Dunedin Study](#) published a famous paper that's often referred to around the importance of self-regulation development where they showed that poor self-regulation at age three was predictive of a wide array of adverse outcomes in adulthood.

"So if you had poorer self-regulation, you had higher rates of unemployment, relationship difficulties, physical health difficulties, mental health difficulties, substance use problems, criminal involvement ... so it was a strong predictor of life course outcome."

Healey said self-regulation was a core life skill, and one that related specifically to the transition from early childhood education to school.

"Being able to sit still focus, concentrate, manage your emotions and behaviours in the classroom for example are really important skills."

University of Canterbury psychology professor Lianne Woodward agreed, and maintained the strength of the Engage programme came from its real-world application, which signalled a move away from computer-based teaching methods.



"It's play-based and it's fun for children, and so they're learning but they're playing.

"Children learn in interactions with other humans."

University of Otago education professor Alex Gunn cautions that no technique was a silver bullet, and warned against being too prescriptive about what was and was not 'correct' child behaviour.

In her view, the merit of the Engage programme was its ability to foster shared understanding about behavioural expectations and "getting adults to talk to each other".

"It really schools the adults more than the children in some ways ... and that's a little bit of magic in the approach."

[Government funding in April last year](#), means Engage is now rolling out across early learning centres and according to programme lead, Jimmy McLauchlan, is on track to be in more than 2000 by mid-2027.

### **Walk like a giraffe**

Healey said for parents wanting to encourage certain behaviours, the key was to explain the skill and the why first.

"Sometimes when you walk down to the park with mum, if you run ahead that could be dangerous, so you might need to slow down when she asks you."

The next step was to introduce the game that used those skills.

Healey said the most important part was to link it all back to real-life scenarios. She said in the Engage game, 'animal speeds' could be a useful one for indicating a gear change.

"A cheetah could be really fast, a giraffe could be moderate, and a sloth could be slow. "So if you're a parent with a child and they're running around and you want them to slow down you could say, 'Go into sloth mode'.

"Or if you want to speed up you could say, 'You're bit of a sloth at the moment, go into giraffe mode, we need to hurry up to get somewhere on time!'"

Reference: <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/national/529696/how-to-stop-a-tantrum-before-it-starts>