



Helping Children Handle Frustration

From *Zach Gets Frustrated* by William Mulcahy

As young children grow up, they continually encounter new tasks to accomplish and grow from – and become frustrated by. In many instances, children’s success depends on their ability to endure and overcome frustration – the feeling we get when we can’t do what we are trying to do, or we can’t solve a problem facing us. Showing children how to cope with frustration in a way that puts them in charge of their thoughts and feelings not only helps them accomplish particular tasks, it helps prepare them for a lifetime of success.

The frustration triangle is most successful when adults and children are partners in learning about and practicing the three steps. Unfortunately, adults often misunderstand frustration; or worse, they take it personally as an affront to their parenting skills. Keep in mind that frustration is a naturally occurring emotion that all people experience. Approach frustrated children with understanding and compassion. Modeling understanding and compassion will also help children treat themselves that way while frustrated.

The frustration triangle has the power to:

- Build confidence
- Increase a sense of peace and calmness
- Decrease the likelihood of the fight-or-flight response in the brain
- Increase the likelihood of successfully dealing with frustration and other difficult emotions in the future
- Lift feelings of sadness and anxiety
- Enhance relationships

Here is more information about the three parts of the frustration triangle. With practice, most children will be able to move fluidly from step 1 (name it) to step 2 (tame it) to step 3 (reframe it).

1. **Name it.** In this step, children make themselves aware of what is causing their frustration. This may sound overly simple or obvious but naming the source of frustration increases people’s awareness of their emotional state. This increased awareness puts them in a stronger position to cope with their emotions very accurately, including frustration.
2. **Tame it.** Help children move out of their automatic thoughts and into the present moment by using relaxation skills (what are referred to in this story as “chill skills”). Using these skills helps the mind let go of the frustration. These skills may include slow deep breathing, counting to ten, progressive relaxation, spending time in nature, prayer, meditation, listening to music, praying, and mindfulness practices (focusing on the senses).
3. **Reframe it.** At first, teach children to be specific in reframing frustrating situations. For instance, “This kite won’t fly, but the beach is awesome. I love jumping in the waves.” As children become more efficient, they often learn to reframe frustration with a simple, “Everything’s okay” or “This too will pass”.

A few other tips:

- Teach children the frustration triangle before it is needed, when frustration isn’t high, so they know what to expect. Let them know that you believe that they can handle their frustration.
- Encourage children to develop their own ways to name it, tame it, reframe it. As long as they are following the basic structure, let them be playful and use their imagination.
- Use the frustration triangle yourself. You might be surprised at how helpful it can be.
- Encourage kids not to be too hard on themselves. Everyone gets frustrated.
- The frustration triangle is not about stuffing emotions. Help children understand that frustration is a natural emotion and it is what they do with their emotions that matter.