



Guest post by Donna DeForbes of [Eco-Mothering](#)

At six-and-a-half, my daughter appears to be growing into a mature, caring person. She expresses her feelings and shows compassion for others. (I've even witnessed her self-regulate TV time!) Something's apparently working, and when I consider how we raise our daughter, I suspect these six tools have been effective in her emotional development.

#### 1. LISTEN WITH RESPECT

*Everybody wants to be heard.* This is even truer for kids whose emotions and ideas spill out at warp speed. Constantly undermining that with “Be quiet” or “Not now” dismisses the equal importance of what they have to say.

This requires really listening to what happened in school today or the detailed account of last night's dream. Asking specific questions ("So how big was this tutu-wearing purple monster?") demonstrates caring.

It's a heady feeling when we have someone's full attention. Kids feel it and blossom from it.

## 2. SHOW EMPATHY FOR FEELINGS

Empathy is the ability to identify with another's feelings. Children don't truly develop this skill until about age six, yet they require it from us almost daily.

Their feelings are huge, and they need to know that all those feelings are okay—not just the shiny, happy ones.

When conflict arises, adults often fall into a logical determination of "right vs. wrong." A child cannot process such information until his feelings are acknowledged first. *Especially if there is strong anger or fear.*

**Sofie struggles with conflict resolution.** Her emotions overwhelm her so that she cannot listen to the hurt child or own responsibility for anything in that moment.

We have learned that the most effective first step is to notice and validate Sofie's feelings, saying things like: "I see that you're really upset about what happened. Do you need a hug?"

## 3. ALLOW SAFE SPACE

Showing empathy may mean giving the child emotional space. And I don't

mean time outs. Time outs are a quick remedy to relief. Relief for the parent, not the child who is sent to a room or chair to “think about what they did.”

What does this teach? That he is “bad”? That her actions or feelings are too big to be dealt with? They have been sent away for doing something when likely their behavior is a sign of needing more attention or understanding.

While we don’t use time outs, we have learned that Sofie often needs space in the aftermath of a conflict. When emotionally overwhelmed, it’s best for her to step away and calm down.

The difference is that the space is now self-directed rather than imposed upon her. I may say: “I see that you’re angry. Are you able to work this out with Jamie or do you need some space first?”

Sometimes Sofie will run to her room crying. After a few minutes, I’ll follow and sit with her. Nine times out of ten, she wants me there with her, even if she’s still angry.

My presence is comforting in the face of scary emotions. She learns to experience such feelings in a safe space... without being sent away.

#### 4. OFFER CHOICES

*Kids are never their best selves when they feel trapped.* Providing choices (“Do you need a hug, or do you need space?” “Would you rather talk about this now or talk about it in ten minutes?”) allows freedom and respect.

**It leads away from black and white thinking, and helps children**

## **grow into adults who see options in every situation.**

Parents can share messages of responsibility this way. Instead of “You should apologize to Gabby,” it can be “Gabby seems sad that you called her a name. Would you rather talk to her about her sadness or draw a happy picture for her?” We’re giving the message that the incident does need to be addressed, yet the child has a say in how it’s done.

Very powerful for them.

### 5. DON'T FORCE APOLOGIES

This is a controversial tool because apologies are expected in our society as a sign of politeness. Yet too many adults offer “sorry” as an automatic response rather than sincere acknowledgement.

When little ones get into conflict, the parent of the “responsible one” often feels compelled to force an apology from her child, if nothing more than to please the other parent. Kids learn nothing from this, except that they did something wrong.

What’s more effective in the long run is acknowledging both kids’ feelings and using age-appropriate statements to help the children learn from the situation.

An example for two-year-olds might be: “Henry felt sad when you took his toy. Let’s choose something where both of you can feel good.”

For five-year-olds (who have a better understanding of how they affect other

people): “Maya seems upset about being hit on the arm. Is there something you could do to help her feel better?” More than scripted words, this gentle manner inspires solutions from the child.

### **It might even lead to random acts of sincere empathy.**

#### 6. FIND A SOLUTION TOGETHER

Punishments are doled out to enforce a sense of control over someone else. Effective solutions are found together. When a child feels heard and validated, his mind expands to consider solutions to conflict.

### **A six-year-old can help decide the consequence of breaking a window.**

This kind of participation leads to her feeling empowered rather than controlled.

*Discipline is about self-control.* When we treat our children with respect and equality, they more readily learn the necessary skills to regulate themselves. Discipline doesn't need to be a constant battle of wills. With tools like these, it can be a positive, affirming process that, in the end, is both effective and connecting for you and your child.

About the author: Donna DeForbes is a writer, designer and the creator of [Eco-Mothering](#) where she blogs about conscious parenting, nature, humor and guilt-free green living. A Philly native, she currently lives in Rhode Island with her progressive husband, precocious six-year-old daughter and a yellow-tailed woolly monkey named Eek. Follow [Eco-Mothering](#) on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).