

After the Storm

A practical repair toolkit for parents of children who go from calm to storm in seconds.

ABOUT THIS TOOLKIT

Explosive anger in young children is one of the most common concerns parents raise, and one of the least well served by generic advice. This toolkit translates published research on co-regulation, emotional development and rupture-and-repair into a practical three-phase system: what to say during the storm, when it breaks, and later when everyone is calm. Every technique has been used and refined in frontline practice by a qualified youth worker supporting children aged 5 to 9, including children with additional needs. Sources are cited throughout and listed in full in the references.

CONTENTS

01	The Storm Map	what is happening, phase by phase
02	The Scripts	ten worded responses, indexed by moment
03	Our Storm Plan	a one-page plan completed with the child
04	The Storm Log	a two-week observation record
05	The Fridge Card	the full system on one reference card
06	The Evidence	sources and limitations, fully cited

What a storm actually is

An explosion is not a naughtiness plan. It is a feeling arriving faster than a small brain's brakes can grow: the self-control circuits of the prefrontal cortex are still under construction right through early childhood [1]. That is why logic mid-storm fails: you are talking to the thunder. The toolkit works because it matches WHAT you say to WHERE the storm is. Same child, three phases, three different jobs.

PHASE 1 During the storm

Screaming, throwing, the slam.

YOUR ONE JOB: SAFETY

Be the lighthouse: present, boring, unmovable. No teaching, no consequences, no clever questions. Scripts 1 to 4.

PHASE 2 When it breaks

Shaky, teary, watching your face.

YOUR ONE JOB: NO SHAME

They are checking one thing: are we okay? Warmth now decides what the storm gets remembered as. Scripts 5 to 7.

PHASE 3 Later, when calm

Hours later, calm, side by side.

YOUR ONE JOB: THE PLAN

Now the words work. One question, one plan made together, one I-love-you. Scripts 8 to 10.

SAFETY NO SHAME THE PLAN. In that order, every time. Skipping ahead is why storms repeat.

The golden rules, whichever phase you are in:

- **Low, slow, few.** Half volume, half speed, half the words. Children settle by borrowing a calmer nervous system next to theirs; researchers call it co-regulation [2].
- **Repair beats rewind.** Ed Tronick's infant studies found ordinary parent-child interaction is out of sync much of the time; what predicts secure kids is not fewer ruptures but reliable repair [3].
- **Count repairs, not explosions.** Storms shrink over months, not days. The log on page 7 makes the shrinking visible.

The wider frame: John Gottman's longitudinal work found children of "emotion coaching" parents (name the feeling, hold the limit, solve it together, exactly the shape of these scripts) later showed better emotional regulation, focus and peer relationships [4]. Full citations on the last page.

Every child and every family is different, keep what suits yours. These are gentle ideas for everyday moments, not medical or behaviour advice.

During the storm

PHASE 1 DURING THE STORM

PHASE 2 WHEN IT BREAKS

PHASE 3 LATER, WHEN CALM

One job only: be the safe, boring lighthouse. No teaching, no consequences, no clever questions. Those come later, and they only work because you did this part first.

1 “I’m here. You’re safe. I’ll stay while this is big.”

INSTEAD OF: *“Calm down right now!”*

WHY IT WORKS: an exploding child is scanning for danger; you answer the only question that matters

2 “I’m going to sit right here. When you want me, I’m close.”

INSTEAD OF: *“Stop screaming this instant!”*

WHY IT WORKS: presence without demand gives a way back that costs no pride

3 “Let’s find a quieter spot. I’ll come with you.”

INSTEAD OF: *“Go to your room until you can behave!”*

WHY IT WORKS: sent-away reads as you are too much for me; moved-with reads as we can handle this

4 “(almost nothing) One soft line: “I’ve got you.” Then quiet.”

INSTEAD OF: *“That’s ENOUGH!”*

WHY IT WORKS: at the peak even kind words are fuel; a calm body next to theirs is the message

FIELD NOTE

If things are unsafe, move bodies first and talk later: “I won’t let you hit. I’m moving us to the sofa.” Kind and immovable can be the same thing.

THE EVIDENCE: Why so few words at the peak? A child at full arousal is running on stress physiology, not reasoning; regulation is borrowed from a calm adult before it is built from instruction [2]. The safety-first, teach-later ordering follows the co-regulation practice literature [2][5].

Every child and every family is different, keep what suits yours. These are gentle ideas for everyday moments, not medical or behaviour advice.

When it breaks

PHASE 1 DURING THE STORM

PHASE 2 WHEN IT BREAKS

PHASE 3 LATER, WHEN CALM

The screaming stops and the watching-you bit begins. Your child is checking one thing: are we okay? Whatever you say now is what the whole storm gets remembered by.

5 “That was a big one. You’re okay. I’m not cross with you.”

INSTEAD OF: *“Are you done now?”*

WHY IT WORKS: the first scan after a storm is for shame; remove it and the body can finish settling

6 “Your body had a storm. Storms pass. We’re okay, we’re always okay.”

INSTEAD OF: *“What was THAT about?”*

WHY IT WORKS: separates the child from the behaviour, the exact difference they cannot see yet

7 “Your hands moved fast when the storm came. Let’s check Ivy is okay together.”

INSTEAD OF: *“Say sorry for hitting your sister.”*

WHY IT WORKS: repair done together teaches the skill; a forced sorry just ends the scene

FIELD NOTE

A drink of water, a cool flannel, a cuddle if wanted. Bodies finish storms before minds do; comfort the body first and the talk goes better.

THE EVIDENCE: The repair moment is the most-studied part of this toolkit: Tronick’s work on interactive mismatch found ruptures are normal and frequent, and that reliably repaired ruptures are how infants and children build resilience and trust [3]. The no-shame framing echoes emotion-coaching research: accepting the feeling while holding the standard predicts better regulation over time [4].

Every child and every family is different, keep what suits yours. These are gentle ideas for everyday moments, not medical or behaviour advice.

Later, when calm

PHASE 1 DURING THE STORM

PHASE 2 WHEN IT BREAKS

PHASE 3 LATER, WHEN CALM

Hours later, shoulder to shoulder rather than face to face, is when a big feeler can actually think about the storm. Two minutes here is worth twenty mid-meltdown.

8 “Remember this morning’s storm? What did it feel like in your body just before?”

INSTEAD OF: “We need to talk about what happened.”

WHY IT WORKS: calm curiosity builds the noticing skill, and noticing early is how storms shrink

9 “Next time the storm is coming, what could we try? Stomping? Squeezing my hand? You pick.”

INSTEAD OF: “You have to stop doing this.”

WHY IT WORKS: a plan the child chose while calm is the only plan that gets used mid-wobble

10 “Storms don’t change how much I love you. Nothing does.”

INSTEAD OF: “Let’s just forget about today.”

WHY IT WORKS: the sentence they keep; big feelers most fear being loved less for feeling big

FIELD NOTE

Keep it tiny: one question, one plan, one I-love-you. If they shrug and change the subject, the words still landed. They always do.

THE EVIDENCE: Why talk later works: putting feelings into words measurably dampens amygdala (alarm) activity in brain-imaging studies of affect labelling [6] (adult studies, but the everyday version, “name it to tame it”, is standard guidance in child development work [7]). Asking the child to choose the plan builds the executive-function skills that are still developing at this age [1].

Every child and every family is different, keep what suits yours. These are gentle ideas for everyday moments, not medical or behaviour advice.

Our Storm Plan

Fill this in WITH your child, on a calm day, felt-tips out. A plan the child chose is the only plan that gets used mid-wobble. Stick it somewhere they can see.

THIS IS THE STORM PLAN OF: _____

1. MY STORM WARNING SIGNS

How does your body tell you a storm is coming? (hot face, tight fists, loud tummy...)

2. WHAT HELPS ME IN A STORM

Circle together: squeeze hands / stomp / cold drink / cuddle / quiet spot / blanket / being left be

3. MY CALM-DOWN SPOT IS

Pick one place. Storms are easier with somewhere to go.

4. GROWN-UP PROMISES

e.g. I will stay close. I will use a soft voice. I will never love you less for a storm.

SIGNED, ON A CALM AND SUNNY DAY:

SMALL PERSON _____

GROWN-UP _____



Every child and every family is different, keep what suits yours. These are gentle ideas for everyday moments, not medical or behaviour advice.

The Storm Log

Two minutes a night, two weeks. Not to grade yourself: to catch the pattern (storms cluster around hunger, transitions and big days) and to SEE the repairs adding up. Parents who log a fortnight usually spot the trigger by day five.

DAY	WHAT LIT IT (best guess)	PHASE WE WOBBLED	SCRIPT I USED	REPAIR DONE?	ONE SMALL WIN
1				☐	
2				☐	
3				☐	
4				☐	
5				☐	
6				☐	
7				☐	
8				☐	
9				☐	
10				☐	
11				☐	
12				☐	
13				☐	
14				☐	

END OF WEEK CHECK

Storms this week: _____ Repairs this week: _____ The repair number is the one that builds the child.

Every child and every family is different, keep what suits yours. These are gentle ideas for everyday moments, not medical or behaviour advice.

The whole system, one card

Cut along the dashed line, stick it on the fridge. Mid-storm you will not remember page four; you will remember the fridge.

AFTER THE STORM | the fridge card

lanternpathbooks.com

DURING
Safety.

“I’m here. You’re safe. I’ll stay while this is big.” Then low, slow, few.

IT BREAKS
No shame.

“That was a big one. You’re okay. I’m not cross with you.”

LATER
The plan.

“Next time the storm comes, what could we try? You pick.” + “Storms don’t change how much I love you.”

SKIP THESE, THEY FEED THE STORM:

“Calm down” | “Go to your room” | “Say sorry” (mid-storm) | every question that starts with “why”

You are doing a lovely job. Truly.

Big feelers are not broken: they feel everything at full volume, and the same wiring that makes Tuesday hard makes them fierce friends and enormous lovers of the people they trust. Our gentle picture books give them these same ideas in story form, calm characters, feelings named out loud, cosy endings. A story at bedtime is repair on the easy days too.

Browse the books: lanternpathbooks.com

Every child and every family is different, keep what suits yours. These are gentle ideas for everyday moments, not medical or behaviour advice.

Evidence and sources

Nothing in this toolkit is invented advice. Every technique is a plain-language translation of published research on how children develop self-regulation, and each one has been used in frontline youth-work practice with children aged 5 to 9, including children with additional needs, before it earned a place here. Here is exactly where each idea comes from, so you can check us.

References

1. Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University (2011). Building the Brain's "Air Traffic Control" System: How Early Experiences Shape the Development of Executive Function. Working Paper No. 11. developingchild.harvard.edu
Cited for: Self-control is still under construction
2. Rosanbalm, K.D. & Murray, D.W. (2017). Caregiver Co-regulation Across Development: A Practice Brief. OPRE Brief #2017-80. Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, US Department of Health and Human Services.
Cited for: Children settle by co-regulating with a calm adult first
3. Tronick, E. & Gianino, A. (1986). Interactive mismatch and repair: Challenges to the coping infant. *Zero to Three*, 6(3), 1-6. See also Tronick, E. (2007). *The Neurobehavioral and Social-Emotional Development of Infants and Children*. W.W. Norton.
Cited for: Rupture is normal; repair is what builds secure kids
4. Gottman, J.M., Katz, L.F. & Hooven, C. (1996). Parental meta-emotion philosophy and the emotional life of families. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 10(3), 243-268.
Cited for: Emotion coaching predicts better regulation years later
5. Siegel, D.J. & Payne Bryson, T. (2011). *The Whole-Brain Child*. Delacorte Press. The "connect and redirect" principle: emotional connection before logic or correction.
Cited for: Comfort first, teach later
6. Lieberman, M.D., Eisenberger, N.I., Crockett, M.J., Tom, S.M., Pfeifer, J.H. & Way, B.M. (2007). Putting feelings into words: Affect labeling disrupts amygdala activity in response to affective stimuli. *Psychological Science*, 18(5), 421-428.
Cited for: Naming a feeling calms the brain's alarm system
7. Siegel, D.J. & Payne Bryson, T. (2011), as above; widely adopted in parenting and early-childhood education guidance.
Cited for: "Name it to tame it" in everyday practice

LIMITATIONS

This research is about parent-child interaction in general; no one has run a trial on this exact PDF, and we will not pretend otherwise. Study 6 was conducted with adults; its everyday application to children is an extension made by clinicians, not the paper itself. This toolkit is education, not therapy: if storms feel bigger than ordinary, your GP or child health nurse is the right next step.

Every child and every family is different, keep what suits yours. These are gentle ideas for everyday moments, not medical or behaviour advice.