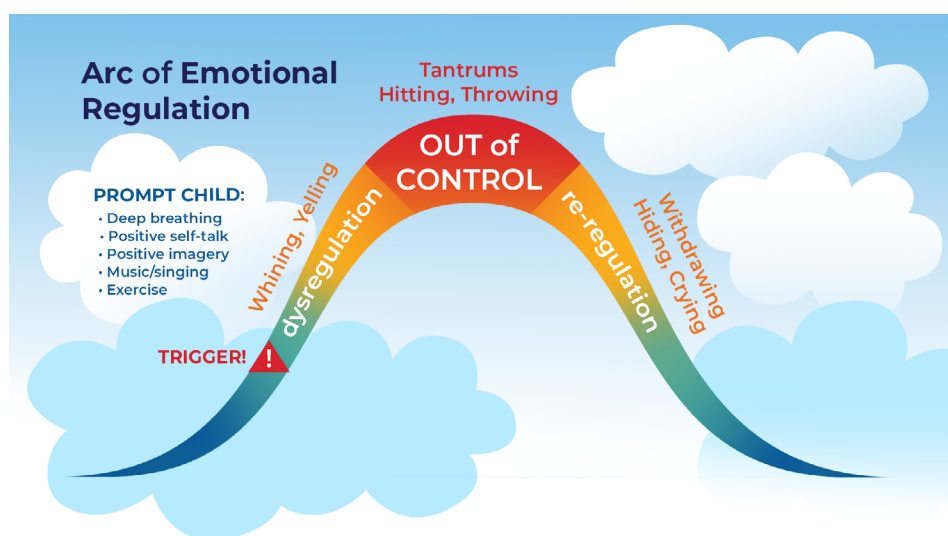


Connection Before Correction

The Incredible Years® Approach for Supporting Emotional Regulation and Autonomy in Children with PDA Characteristics

by Carolyn Webster-Stratton, M.S., M.P.H., Ph.D.
University of Washington



Introduction

Parents and professionals often ask whether the Incredible Years® approach is appropriate for children who are described as having a PDA (Pathological Demand Avoidance or Persistent Drive for Autonomy) profile. While PDA is not a formal DSM diagnosis, many of the principles that characterize PDA-informed practice—such as reducing unnecessary demands, supporting autonomy, strengthening co-regulation, and maintaining emotional safety—are highly compatible with the Incredible Years® approach.

Research on children's cognitive and emotional development tells us that most toddlers are naturally driven to explore, seek autonomy, and resist adult limits (Stroufe, 1995; Green, 2014). Tantrums are common in all children. Young children's limited language comprehension, immature self-regulation skills or certain sensory aversions contribute to meltdowns in response to adult requests and/or unexpected change in schedule. By approximately 4 years of age, as children's language understanding and emotional regulation and coping skills improve, compliance with parental requests typically increases to about 70%, which is considered developmentally normal. Some resistance to adult direction is healthy and reflects growing independence.

However, when children resist or refuse parental requests more than two thirds of the time of the time, family functioning, socialization, and safety can become significantly affected. Parents may then feel increasingly stressed, frustrated, or uncertain about how to respond effectively.

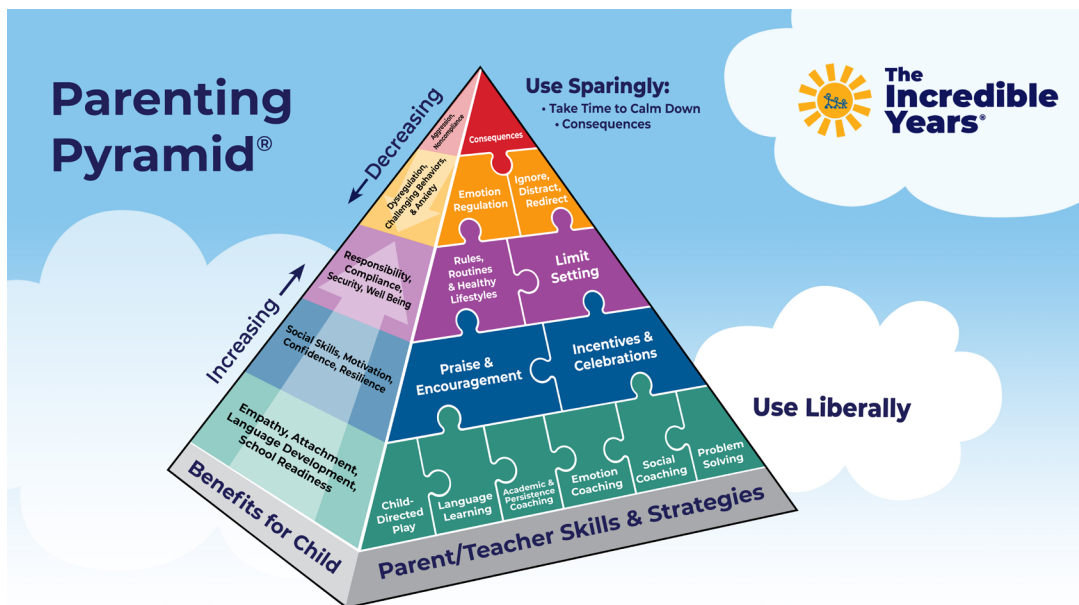
Connection Before Correction



Traditional behavior management approaches that rely heavily on excessive commands, repeated verbal demands, harsh discipline, forced compliance, criticism, or punitive uses of Time Out may unintentionally escalate emotional dysregulation in highly reactive children. Some children become more oppositional, controlling, anxious, withdrawn or explosive when they perceive increasing external parent pressure, anger or loss of autonomy.

These observations suggest the importance of discipline approaches that are brief, calm, predictable, emotionally attuned, relationship-based, and supportive of children's developing self-regulation skills. Effective interventions emphasize co-regulation, empathy, emotional safety, and opportunities for children to practice new coping strategies while maintaining clear and consistent boundaries. (Siegel & Bryson, 2011; Porges, 2011)

How the Incredible Years® Parent Program Helps Children Learn to Self-Regulate



The first half of the Incredible Years parenting curriculum (Programs 1 & 2) focuses primarily on “Time In” (Webster-Stratton, C., 2015). Time In refers to strengthening the parent-child relationship through child-directed play, positive attention, descriptive commenting and emotionally responsive interactions that promote children’s language and interactive conversations, social engagement, and secure attachment.

Parents learn four coaching strategies that build children’s persistence, frustration tolerance, emotional literacy, social skills, school readiness and ability to understand and comply with family rules and predictable routines. Positive attention, support and encouragement are used to strengthen children’s confidence, cooperation, and emotional connection with parents. (see: <https://www.incredibleyears.com/research/library/article/incredible-years-time-out-works-because-of-quality-of-time-in>)

The second phase of the IY curriculum (Program 3) focuses on establishing predictable routines and visual schedules, clear family rules, healthy lifestyle habits, and developmentally appropriate expectations. Parents learn to reduce the overall number of commands they give, avoid repeated commands, use visuals, and communicate expectations in a calm, respectful, clear, emotionally steady, and a non-threatening manner.

Whenever possible, parents are encouraged to offer choices, prepare children with warnings or transitions, and phrase requests collaboratively. For example:

- “In five minutes, screen time will be over, and then we can work on your puzzle.”
- “When your toys are put away, then we can have your snack.”
- “It’s time for bed. You can choose which story you would like tonight.”

These approaches help reduce unnecessary power struggles while still maintaining parental leadership and predictable boundaries.

What is meant by PDA?

PDA, often described as *Pathological Demand Avoidance* or *Persistent Drive for Autonomy*, is not currently a formal stand-alone formal diagnosis in DSM. Rather, it refers to a behavioral profile observed in some young children who become emotionally dysregulated when limits, expectations, or boundaries are placed on their behavior.

It is theorized that when a child's strong drive for autonomy, control or exploration is obstructed, this can trigger anxiety, frustration, anger or meltdowns related to perceived loss of control. PDA characteristics are often described in children who have been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADHD), Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD), Autism Spectrum Disorder, language delays, sensory processing difficulties, or emotional regulation challenges.

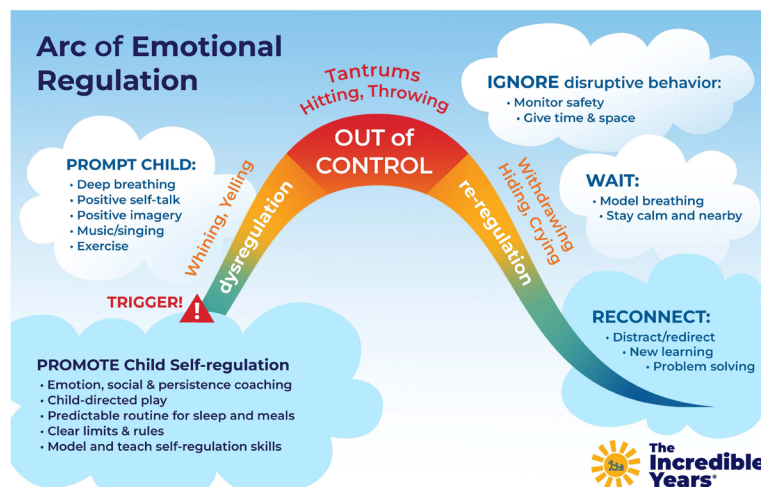
Understanding “Meltdowns” through Incredible Years Arc of Emotion

When children begin to escalate emotionally through whining, crying, arguing, refusal, or tantrums, parents are encouraged to consider what may have triggered the dysregulation. They reflect on some possible “triggers” such as:

- not getting something they want – parent saying, “no”
- reacting to an unexpected transition or sudden change in routine
- misunderstanding a social situation
- being overtired
- being overstimulated
- sensory aversion
- feeling anxious or stressed
- being hurt or frustrated
- being hungry
- seeking connection or attention

While it can be hard to anticipate every possible trigger, understanding the possible reason for the child's accelerating dysregulation helps parents respond more thoughtfully and effectively.

Parents learn about the “Arc of Emotional Dysregulation” and assess whether the child is in the early stages of emotional escalation or has moved into the “red zone,” where logical discussion and problem solving are no longer effective.

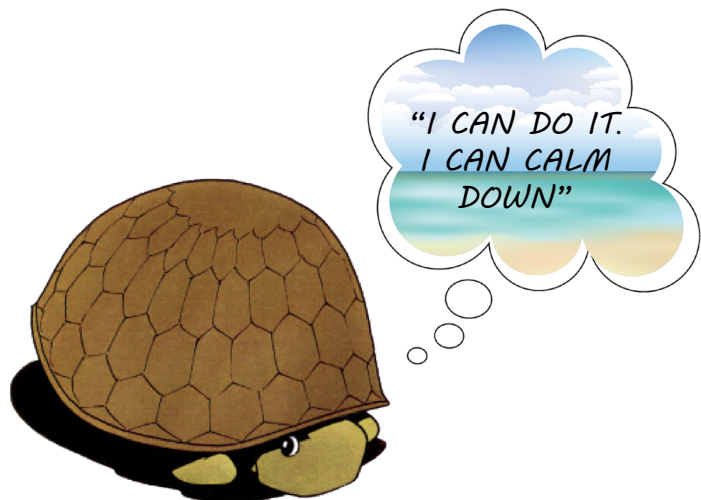
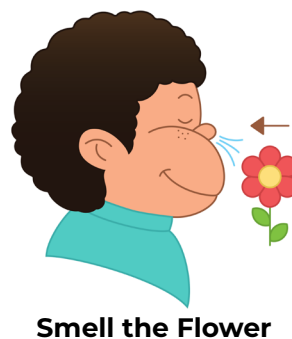
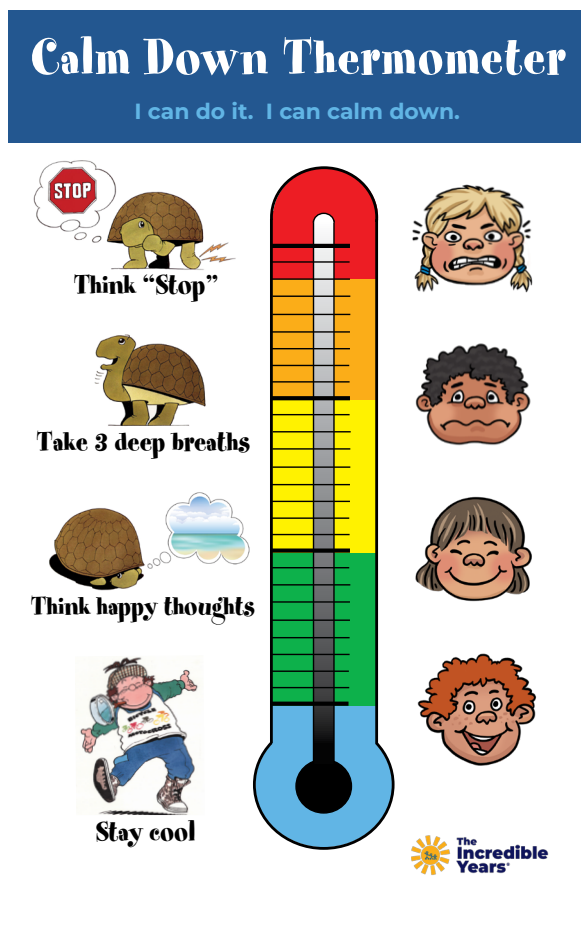


Parent Self-Regulation Modeling, Prompts and Practice

By Program 4 of the IY curriculum, parents have already spent considerable time coaching children's emotional language and social skills so children can increasingly express feelings verbally rather than physically. Parents then begin actively teaching self-regulation strategies such as using:

- deep breathing
- calming self-talk
- positive imagery
- movement and exercise
- relaxation methods
- music
- sensory calming activities
- offering a snack or drink

Parents may use visual supports and sensory tools such as the Incredible Years Calm Down Thermometer poster, breathing balls and images, comfort objects, books, and puppet scenarios. The Tiny Turtle puppet is often used to model how children can pause, retreat into their "shell," take calming breaths, think of a peaceful place, and then try again.



Importantly, these self-regulation strategies are first taught and practiced when children are calm and emotionally regulated. This increases the likelihood that children can successfully use the strategies later during moments of stress or frustration.

For example, when a child begins to dysregulate, parents may offer supportive verbal or visual prompts such as:

- *“Your body looks tired and may need a rest.”*
- *“Would you like a snack?”*
- *“Let’s try some deep breathing together, by smelling the flower and blowing out the candle.”*
- *“Tiny Turtle says it might help to go into your shell and take some breaths.”*
- *“Would you like your special bear, listen to some music, or a walk outside?”*

These prompts are offered using invitational, supportive language and suggestions rather than as rigid commands.

Parents also co-regulate alongside the child by modeling calming behaviors themselves — breathing slowly, using calming self-talk, lowering their voice, offering comfort, singing or engaging in soothing activities together. Co-regulation typically precedes children’s ability to independently self-regulate.

This understanding is supported by interpersonal neurobiology and Polyvagal Theory research, which emphasize that children regulate more effectively when they experience emotional safety, calm adult presence, and supportive social connection (Siegel & Bryson, 2011; Porges, 2011).

When Self-Regulation Prompts Don't Work – “Hot Zone”

If the child's emotional escalation continues despite supportive prompts into the “hot zone” of the emotional regulation curve, parents determine which behaviors they will actively ignore. These might include whining, arguing, yelling, complaining, or defiant gestures and words. At this point communication needs to be minimal or non-existent.

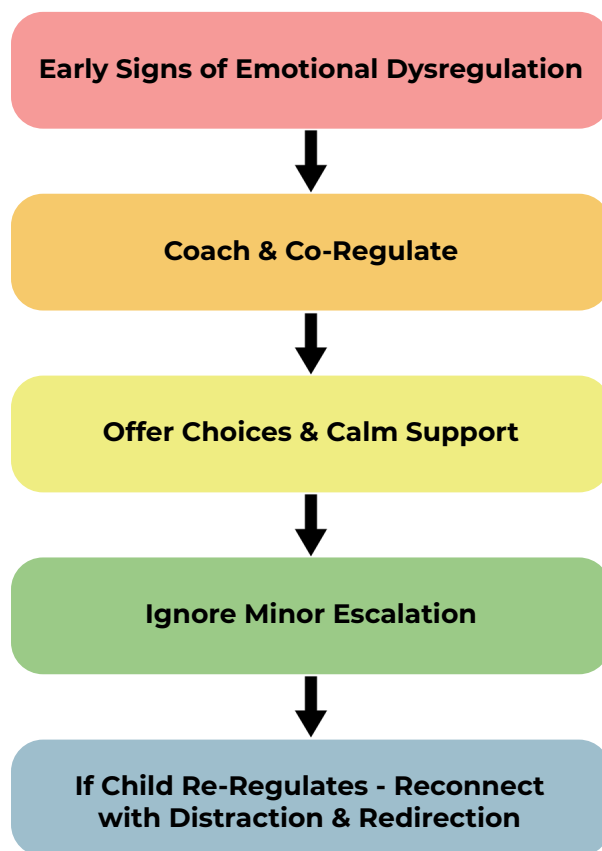
At this stage on the Arc of Emotional Regulation the child is given time and emotional space to regain control while the parent remains nearby, calm, emotionally available, and attentive to safety. The goal is to assure the safety for the child as well as other family members nearby.

Once the child de-escalates and is calm, the parent reconnects positively and distracts and redirects the child to another activity. For example:

- *“Now that your body is calm, you can help me wash the potatoes.”*
- *“Would you like a snack or to read together?”*

This non-shaming approach preserves the child's dignity, reduces emotional pressure, and allows space for recovery without reinforcing escalating behavior through excessive attention or demands.

Parent Response During Child's Emotional Escalation



When Emotional Dysregulation Involves Unsafe Behavior – Practice Positive Time Out (PTO) First

Parents identify specific behaviors that cannot be ignored because they are unsafe, such as hitting, biting, hurting siblings or pets, throwing objects, or destroying property.

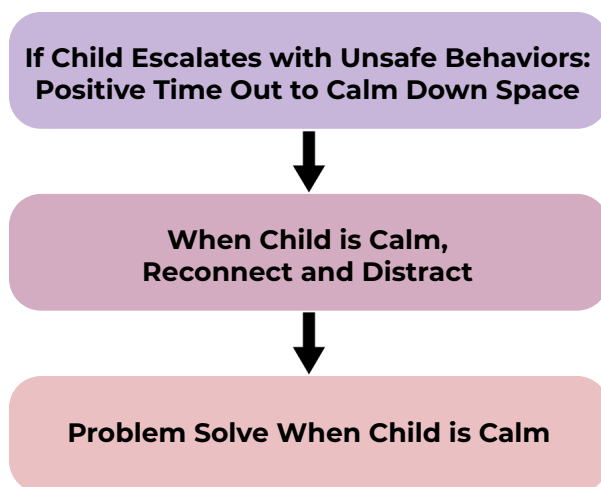
In these situations, parents use the Incredible Years strategy called Positive Time Out to Calm Down (PTO). This approach is taught and practiced proactively when the child is calm before major dysregulation occurs.

Children practice going to a designated calm-down space where they use previously learned calming strategies such as breathing, positive imagery, and sensory tools. Puppets are often used in role play practices to show children how they can go to the calm down space, calm their bodies with breathing and positive self-talk, and return when calm, without shame or blame.

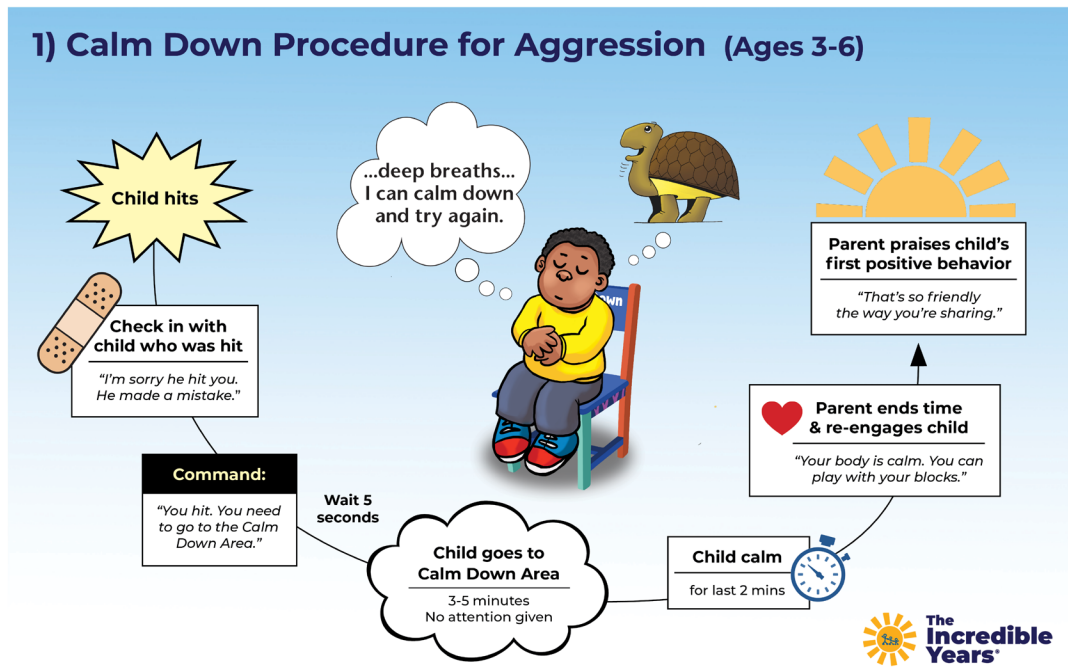
Parents might say:

- *“Your body is feeling very frustrated. You need some time in your calm-down space to help your body feel safe.”*
- *“I can see you need space right now. I’ll stay nearby while your body calms.”*

Parent Response During Child’s Emotional Escalation



1) Calm Down Procedure for Aggression (Ages 3-6)



The primary goal is emotional recovery and safety — not punishment.

Children are given time to move to the calm-down space independently whenever possible. If child resists, parents may calmly offer a choice such as whether the child would like to walk there independently, or with their support. If the child is too dysregulated to go on their own and touch is a further trigger, the parent may introduce an alternative consequence such as a loss of privilege, or, add on time, or remove others so the calm down space is where they are. See chapter 9 in *The Incredible Years Trouble Shooting Guide* for more guidelines when children resist PTO, <https://shop.incredibleyears.com/collections/supplemental-materials/products/trouble-shooting-guide-book>

This approach is most effective when the majority of parental attention throughout the day is focused on relationship building, “Time In”, positive involvement, emotional coaching, and reinforcing children’s calm, patient and prosocial behaviors.

The core IY principles during Positive Time Out remain consistent:

- stay calm
- keep everyone safe
- reduce communication and attention when child is in “hot zone”
- wait until child’s emotional escalation has subsided
- return connection and support emotional recovery
- redirect to new activity

For children with strong autonomy needs, Positive Time Out may work best when it is framed as “time in for regulation” rather than punishment or rejection. The goal is not forced compliance, but helping the child interrupt escalation, regain emotional control, and return successfully to positive interaction and learning. When PTO is over, the parent reassures the child with their positive attention and engages in future problem solving at a later time when regulated.

Incredible Years Positive Time Out (PTO) to Calm Down

Traditional Punitive Time Out

Isolation

Punishment

Forced compliance

Shame

Withdrawal of attention

IY Positive Time Out to Calm Down

Supportive space

Emotional recovery

Safety, time & space for emotional recovery

Calm reconnection

Co-regulation nearby



Points to Avoid

Children often initially resist going to a calm-down space, especially if the strategy has not been practiced previously. Parents and group leaders do not necessarily need to use the term Time Out if it carries negative emotional associations for the child or family. Many children like the term Time Out because they have seen it used in sports games as a way to calm down. Other terms might be used such as Time to Calm or Chill.

Avoid:

- engaging in arguments or power struggles,
- repeated commands or threats,
- shaming statements,
- physically forcing the child except in immediate safety situations,
- lecturing or questioning the child while dysregulated,
- or using isolation as withdrawal of love or connection

Instead, the calm-down space can be framed as a supportive place to help the child's body regain safety and control.

The parent's tone should remain calm, emotionally steady, firm, and non-punitive.

Concluding Perspective

For children with PDA characteristics or strong autonomy-driven responses, the Incredible Years approach emphasizes connection, emotional attunement, predictability, co-regulation, and respectful boundary setting. Positive Time Out is framed as an opportunity for emotional recovery rather than punishment for misbehavior.

Children learn that calm and prosocial behavior lead to parental attention, connection, and support, while unsafe behaviors are interrupted in ways that are emotionally safe, predictable, and non-shaming.

The overall goal of the Incredible Years approach is not simply compliance, but helping children develop emotional regulation, resilience, social competence, and secure parent-child relationships while preserving the child's dignity, autonomy, and sense of emotional safety.

In one doctoral student's study of children who participated in the Incredible Years Dinosaur program, several children interviewed at the end of the program said one of the things they liked about the program was going to the Calm Down space to calm down. They saw it as helpful and not as punishing (Houlihan, 2013).

Suggested sources for further reading:

Greene, R. W. (2014). *The Explosive Child: A New Approach for Understanding and Parenting Easily Frustrated, Chronically Inflexible Children*. HarperCollins Publishers.

Houlihan, T.M. (2013). *The Incredible Years 'Dinosaur school' programme: An interpretative phenomenological analysis of children's experiences* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Limerick, Ireland.

Menting, A.T.A, Orobio de Castro, B., & Matthys, W. (2013). Effectiveness of the Incredible Years parent training to modify disruptive and prosocial child behavior: A meta-analytic review. *Clinical Psychology Review* 33 8: 901-913.

Porges, S. W. (2011). *The Polyvagal Theory: Neurophysiological Foundations of Emotions, Attachment, Communication, and Self-Regulation*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

Siegel, D. J., & Bryson, T. P. (2011). *The Whole-Brain Child: 12 Revolutionary Strategies to Nurture Your Child's Developing Mind*. New York: Delacorte Press.

Sroufe, L. A. (1996). *Emotional Development: The Organization of Emotional Life In the Early Years*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Webster-Stratton, C. (2015). The Incredible Years Parent Program: The Methods and Principles that Support Fidelity of Program Delivery. In J. Ponzetti (Ed.), *Evidence-based Parenting Education: A Global Perspective*. (pp. 143-160.). Routledge.

Webster-Stratton, C. (2016). *Time Out Works because of Quality Time In*. (see <https://www.incredibleyears.com/research/library/article/incredible-years-time-out-works-because-of-quality-of-time-in>)

Webster-Stratton, C. (2019). Time Out to Calm Down. In Webster-Stratton, *The Incredible Years: A Trouble-Shooting Guide for Parents of Children Aged 2-8 Years*. (pp. 184-214). Seattle, WA: The Incredible Years.