

## **MoxieTopic: 4.75 Years and The Push-Pull**

*Just when everything had been going so well, it all fell apart again somehow. That's the feeling associated with your child being 4.75.*

(Yes, it can start at 4.5, but it usually intensifies at 4.75 leading right up to 5).

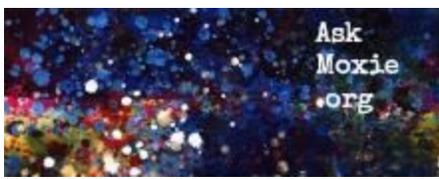
From the time your child comes out of the 3.5-year disequilibrium stage (right around the 4th birthday), things have been getting easier. Your child is really verbal, has probably worked out any rebellion associated with food, and is more participatory and independent every day. You're almost thinking your child seems like a Big Kid, until suddenly it all comes to a screeching halt.

While a lot of stages have been referred to as "regressions," this really does feel like a behavior regression. But a regression all the way back to being a baby or toddler, not just back to the previous stage. Lots of crying, whining, and not wanting you to leave their sight. But at the same time they don't want to be around you and are angry at you just for being there. It's a huge push-pull: "Don't leave me! Go away!"

It feels awful, because your child is rejecting you violently--this may be the first time your child says "I hate you" to you. But at the same time they so desperately want you to be there that it's almost like another separation anxiety phase, in which you can't leave the room or let them break physical contact with you. It's extremely stressful, emotionally and physically, and extremely confusing.

It can feel like there's some ideal way you should be reacting, and if you knew what that was you could make the irrational behavior stop. But there isn't. You're not causing this and you're not missing something that could make it stop.

This is a completely normal developmental phase, and your child is acting like a baby because this is basically the last hurrah of their being a little kid. Once they turn 5, they'll be a Big Kid. And whether they realize it consciously or not, their body and brain are right on schedule giving them a developmentally appropriate freak-out. This is the way they separate from you and close the lid on their lives as little kids. Yes, it's hideous, inefficient, and traumatizing (for you, if not for them). But it's also entirely appropriate developmentally.



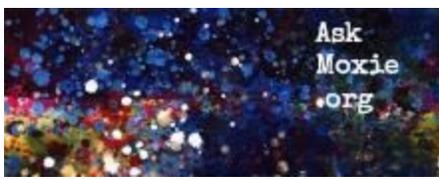
And you can't stop it or fix it. So what can you do?

**1. Know how long it's likely to last.** This is the first time we're really seeing things that are different for boys and girls. (I'm talking about cisgender boys and girls, and obviously this is generalization so not all kids will follow the same patterns, but it's based on hormones that start to be different in girls and boys that affect development.) You may have noticed aggression surges in boys right around the 4th birthday, due to a surge of testosterone. Both sexes go through this miserable push-pull stage around 4.75. Boys tend to come out of it relatively suddenly within a few weeks of the child's 5th birthday. Girls tend to have a longer, slower release from the push-pull that takes months. (Sorry.)

**2. Know what's on the other side.** Once your child is out of this phase (whether it's right after they turn five or months later), your child is going to blow you away with how competent and confident they are. It's also disconcerting the way your kid can be trying to crawl inside your sweater to hide one day, and be super competent, happy, and independent the next. It's competence--in dressing, eating, sleeping, and general regulation of moods and routines--that's the hallmark of the stage right after the difficult 4.75-5-year stage.

**3. Don't expect any kind of deeper meaning.** Both the 18-month and 3.5-year regressions can have a lot of personal value for you the parent, in learning how to pace yourself, in working on tasks related to control and boundaries, in deciding how you want to approach stress together, and in learning what tools to use to help your child with daily life. This regression isn't as useful. Because it's so short and intense and essentially nonsensical, there's not a lot you can get from it personally. If you figured out any tools to help your child from the 3.5-year regression, see if they help here, but don't worry about finding any deeper meaning in this stage.

**4. Know what you can take and what you can't.** By now you know what your personal parenting triggers are. They're often related to your personal triggers from the rest of your life, so if you've had eating issues yourself, you're more likely to be triggered by the control games toddlers play with food, for example. Take yourself seriously, and be aware that whatever hits your nerves and makes you react out of proportion is going to be worse during this really difficult period.



**5. Remember that this is an utterly miserable time for your child, even when they're laughing maniacally.** It doesn't feel good to be this out of control, this angry, this frustrated, and this utterly confused all the time. Which makes your child even more cross and chaotic than they were already. It just doesn't feel good to be this age, and they're not doing it on purpose to hurt you or even just to challenge you. It may be hard to offer sympathy and snuggles when your child repays you by telling you they hate you, but your child really has no one but you to help guide them through this time. If you can stay above the insults and frustration, it'll help your child get through this.

**6. Breathe in. Breathe out.** The good thing is there's nothing you can do about it. The bad thing is there's nothing you can do about it. Just try to stay as calm and easy as possible and eventually it'll end. It's not your fault. It's developmentally appropriate. Relax your mind...

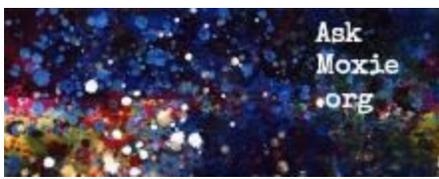
**All this is nice and philosophical, but what's your daily play-by-play plan for dealing with your child?** The theory only gets you so far, and even when you know what attitude you should be having, you still need survival tips or some kind of decision tree for in the moment.

**As much physical exertion as possible.** The more energy you let them expend, the more it helps to regulate their systems and the less tension they'll need to release in ways like tantrumming or being upset. When they're tired out at the end of the day, they feel good. And they simply have less energy to spend on freaking out about nothing.

Give them lots and lots of chances to move their bodies, and lots of running around. Build in things like walking, climbing stairs, making multiple trips, etc. Basically, if you game it like you're trying to get in as many steps on a Fitbit, but for your kid, you'll tire them out.

**As much time with other kids as possible.** Being active and engaged with other kids is going to give them outlets for their energy and help them feel good from being around friends. If they're not in daycare or school, try to get them as much time playing with friends as possible in unstructured play time where they can really interact.

Of course this is a double-edged sword, because they're just more volatile at this age and prone to disagreements with their friends. And once kids hit the age of 4 they become much more aware of social interactions and customs, so they are less free in their play.



But they'll still have an easier time with friends than they do with you, the adult they trust and can release all their chaos with.

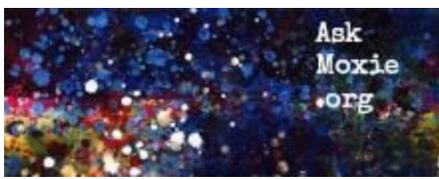
**An extremely regular routine.** Keep it as boring as possible. Eat and sleep at the same times every day, do the same things and go the same places. Predictable, boring routine makes your child feel safe, so they can suffer through this stage with the least amount of drama possible. (Which is still going to be a lot.)

Kids are soothed by regularity and routine. Even things as simple as letting them drink out of the same cup at breakfast every day can help them keep it together when their insides feel all weird and unstable and they don't know what they really want. If it feels really boring to you, that means it's just the right amount of boring for your child.

**Sleep.** I hope I'm not triggering flashbacks to the days of bad sleep. And if your kid is having actual problems sleeping now, this isn't sleep-blaming. But once kids are bigger like this (and, in theory, through the sleep challenges of infancy/toddlerhood/preschoolhood), we can slip into patterns of letting kids stay up "just a little bit" without realizing it. Research shows, though, that even 15 minutes of lost sleep can wreak havoc on the moods and self-regulation of kids this age. So letting them stay up a little to try to buy some peace now can end up causing even more problems tomorrow.

In the next point I'm advocating for letting a lot of systems and structures go, but sleep isn't one of them. If you're going to be a hard-ass parent about anything at all during this stage, be willing to die on the hill of bedtime. Choose a time that gives your kid half an hour more sleep than they've been getting. See how that goes for a week, and then try pushing bedtime back another half hour to see if that helps even more. You'll find the sweet spot with some trial and error. (But I'm willing to bet the sweet spot is more sleep than your kid got last night.)

**Let the systems and structures go.** Remember that back in the MoxieTopic about 3.5-year-olds we talked about how their brains can't really process structure and rules during one of these big developmental shakeups. How it's basically like their entire bodies are snowglobes that have been shaken, and none of the glitter and fake snow has settled back to where it usually is. So the things they've learned like politeness rules, routines they can perform easily on their own without prompting, habitual actions requiring decision steps, anything involving an "if...then" scenario--all waaay too complex for them to face right now. Their brains simply can't handle that complexity.



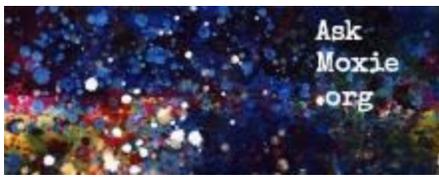
It will come back. They will be able to hold on to complexity again. And you won't really have to refresh it much for them. One day you'll come into the kitchen and your kid will be sitting there eating something that required a multi-step process to get, and they won't have even asked you for help. Competence. But that's not right now. So drop your own expectations for any complex or nuanced interactions, anything requiring emotional stability, or anything conforming to society's expectations for polite behavior.

Is it unfair that you, the parent, have to keep up the dull, predictable routines (including enforcing early bedtime) while your kid is cut a break on even being a decently polite human? Yes. This is unfair. I'm sorry it's happening to you.

**Keep the closeness.** If possible. Your child might really decide that they're way more into the push than the pull of push-pull, and not want to be around you. But I'd try to keep giving lots of hugs and snuggles, since that will help your kid at least feel better physically, even if everything's all confused emotionally and mentally.

Why wants to snuggle a kid who's saying awful things to them and then trying to crawl inside their skin to be closer at the same time? It's exhausting, and hugging your child and letting down your defenses is the last thing you feel like doing. But you can do it. And it's the only way for both of you to come out of this stage without being completely emotionally battered.

**Count your victories.** If it's the end of the day and you haven't broken down in tears under the random reactions of your child, that's major. It can be really tempting to think "Where did my sweet child go?" or, even worse, let yourself go down the "Why did I ever have a child in the first place? Now my life is ruined" rabbit hole. Please don't. It is absolutely going to get better, and you are not going to feel like you're dragging through each day hoping not to be insulted. Every day you try to let it bounce off you (because it truly isn't about you) is a day closer to coming out of this phase and going into another equilibrium phase of competence and pleasantness.



**To recap:**

1. 4.75 is A Thing, and it's a sharp, vicious thing. It's not just you.
2. It can start as early as 4.5 but for some kids slams out of nowhere at 4.75. It escalates up to the fifth birthday. If you have a boy, it might be over suddenly 2-3 weeks after the fifth birthday. If you have a girl, it might dissipate more slowly and not be done for a few months after the fifth birthday.
3. Like any of these other tough developmental phases, this is necessary brain work going on on the inside that causes this difficult behavior. In this case, it's the last hurrah of being a baby before your kid turns five and enters a new stage of competence and mastery.
4. This means that they hate you and love you at the same time, want you to get away but want to be close to you in the same space. It's difficult for them and it's difficult for you.
5. Use the same skills you've used in the past--detaching from outcomes and focusing on the relationship, not the external factors--to get through this stage.

Courage.