

## **MoxieTopic: 3.5 Years Is the Nadir of Humanity**

It's not just you. Your 3.5-year-old is really hard to deal with. Your delightful child has become emotionally volatile and resistant to everything, and no topic or activity seems safe anymore. This age is the worst age people ever are, so once you survive this stage with your relationship with your child intact you're basically bulletproof.

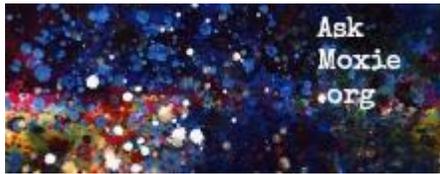
The overwhelming characteristic of your child at this age is emotional dysregulation. They become upset about everything, and can't calm down. They lose perspective about what's worth being upset about, and instead get upset (and throw tantrums) about everything. If your child asks for a donut and you say no, they'll freak out and throw a tantrum. You finally get so tired of it that you hand them a donut, and then they throw a tantrum because you gave them a donut.

You can't win, because your child's brain is just so scrambled from all the normal development happening that they can't regulate their own reactions or behavior. You know how you feel when you're getting sick or haven't had enough sleep? And everything makes you feel angry or sad, and even if you know you're being unreasonable, you can't stop your oversized, out-of-proportion reaction to things? And you just want people to be nice to you and fix things, but not tell you what to do? That's what it's like being 3.5. They're just open wounds walking around unable to deal with things, even things that they loved before.

There are two serious upshots to all of this. One is that they aren't going to be able to keep maturing in their understanding of and conformity to rules and conventions. You've been working on politeness, table manners, bedtime efficiency, social conventions, and all kinds of other rules and regulations. And they've been getting better and better at all of it, and are so much more capable and mature than they were before. But suddenly they really just can't deal. With any of it.

They're purely emotional, and they're out of control. But it has nothing to do with you. This isn't anything you did. You're not raising a sociopath. It's part of the developmental phase--there's so much going on in their brains that they aren't aware of (and you aren't aware of, obviously, either)--that they just don't have the bandwidth to keep up the rules and conventions.

They are already stressed out. And everything makes them feel even more persecuted and overwhelmed. And then they're asked to behave in ways that they don't understand



the reason for, and if they don't act in those ways (that make no sense to them, and might feel punitive), they get in trouble for it. It is extremely stressful for them. So they act out, because they don't really know how to ask for help yet--they just lash out. Which gets them into more trouble, so they get more stressed out. It's a vicious cycle. And it cascades to you, to make you feel trapped and stressed.

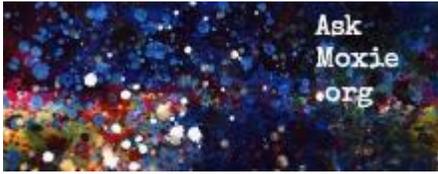
The other upshot is that this is going to be an extremely trying time for you, and there's nothing you can do about it. So much of parenting in general is about not being in control, but sometimes there are actual things you can do to fix things for your kid so they won't be in distress and so they won't make things exhausting and demoralizing for you. This isn't one of those situations, though. Age 3.5 isn't under your control, or you kid's control, either. The brain development happening deep in the brain (along with new independence and new physical and emotional and social skills that are developing) means that there are no resources available for the part of the brain that interfaces with you.

Basically, your child being in chaos and emotional dysregulation for months at a time is normal and healthy at this age. And horrible.

Since you are the adult, you are responsible for creating conditions that help your child ride this out with a healthy amount of friction. (Growth happens as a result of friction. If it was smooth all the time, no one would develop any skills.) And you're also responsible for not letting this demoralize you or make you disconnect from your kid. Friction is good, but actual trauma doesn't have to be part of the deal.

Avoiding trauma is going to require some serious work on your own boundaries and on how you approach working on boundaries with your child. You know what the essential thing you need to hold on to is right now: maintaining the connected relationship. How do you do that while still protecting your own boundaries and while teaching your child boundaries?

I think it helps to think about how you want to react in moments of huge emotional weakness and also how you want your child to react in moments of huge emotional weakness as an adult. We all have those moments of emotional weakness as adults. I get a super-touchy day every month as part of PMS. I also get that way when I'm getting sick, or am tired and dislocated from traveling. Emotional weakness is a normal part of life, and we'd do better if we acknowledge that and plan for it instead of berating ourselves for it. Acknowledging it also allows us to deliberately plan and rehearse how



we want to respond.

Do you want to lash out, tantrum, and then feel abandoned and angry for having hurt people and for being hurt? Probably not, and I bet you don't want your child to do that as an adult, either. Lashing out during moments of emotional weakness causes huge problems in relationships, and can hurt you and the people you love. It can push you apart from the people who love you, at the exact time when you need each other more than ever.

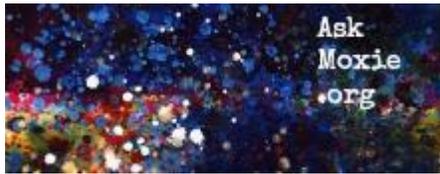
Instead of lashing out, it would be better if you could figure out whether you feel better when you have time alone to regroup or if you regroup better by being in contact with other people. Which helps you regain your balance and perspective, and makes you feel whole again? Some people need to talk it out and process with someone else. Other people really need time alone to rebalance themselves. You're probably one or the other (although you might have different needs in different situations). Spend the time to think about what helps you feel better. Then, depending on what you figure out, either tell the people around you that you're feeling weak and just need to withdraw and have time by yourself to regain your balance, or tell the people around you that you're feeling weak and need their help to regain your balance.

By telling the people who love you exactly how they can help you, you are loving them and showing them how to love you better. It's a win all around, at no cost to any of you.

(Yes, I know this is about techniques for dealing with your 3.5-year-old, not for improving your relationships with older kids and adults. But if you feel better and stronger and more loved personally, you'll be able to deal with your 3.5-year-old better no matter what techniques you use.)

Now, having this plan for yourself means that you are going to be able to teach this plan to your kid--when you feel emotionally weak, do something that will help you regain your balance. Obviously they're not going to be good at it at age 3.5. But the goal is to keep mentoring and teaching it to them so that by the time they're adults with healthy intimate relationships with others, they can ask for what they need and be able to feel better. So start now in a way that makes sense for a young child.

Start by observing what energizes your child--spending time alone, spending time with others, or a mix. You probably already know this just from living with your kid, but pay special attention. When your child is sick, do they want to be with you or do they want to



be alone? What situations do they seek out? Beware that kids can be shy (meaning slow to warm up in new situations) but still get energy from being around other people.

Once you've figured out some things that can comfort your kid, and either help them regain some balance and calm or at least not escalate the chaos and stress, you can help guide your child to those things when they're freaked out (and freaking out). So, for instance, maybe you want to guide them into asking for a hug when they're tantruming, or going into another room with some comfort object to regroup alone.

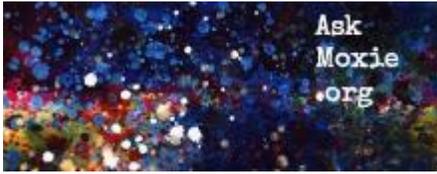
This means that you might have to drop your expectations that they'll perform other behaviors or conform to other policies or rules. You want them to start making their first reaction to distress to be one of doing something that is healthy that makes them feel better and helps them regain balance. So that--self-initiated behaviors that regulate their emotions and behaviors--has to be the top priority. Table manners, taking turns, picking up toys, and all the other things you've been working on with them while they were in an equilibrium phase are not the highest priority, so they can go by the wayside.

This does NOT mean that your kid is going to lose all their skills and that they're going to backslide forever and never be polite people who understand appropriate behavior. Once your child is back out of this emotionally weak stage you'll be able to pick up where you left off teaching the manners and appropriate conventions. They're just not the top priority right now.

There is a huge exception to this: Behavior that hurts people or animals. You can't relax the expectation that your kids don't hurt other beings. So no hitting/biting/kicking/scratching, and no hurtful words. Guide them into behavior that does not hurt other beings. Conveniently, this behavior usually overlaps with whatever behavior helps them regain their balance, so it's the same priority as the comfort behavior.

Also, while you're working to guide your kid into being explicit about performing actions that help them regain balance, you can be thinking about how to do the same thing for yourself. Yes, you have to do it for your kid first, but you also deserve to feel better and not be one raw nerve all the time. If your emotional weakness intersects at all with your child being in this 3.5 year-old phase, it can suck you under. So use this as a way to practice self-care by doing what actually makes you feel better and helps you regroup.

To recap:



1. Age 3.5 and environs just sucks, and it's nothing you did, and it's healthy and appropriate. Hang on and don't take it personally.
2. Your child is one raw nerve, and that's why they can't regulate their emotions or figure out how to be a decent person right now. They have no control over it, and it feels really bad being them right now.
3. Since you can't fix things in the short term, try to ride it out with the goal of maintaining a close emotional connection to your kid, and teaching them how to regain their emotional balance when they feel bad. Nothings going to "fix" this stage anyway, so now's a great time to observe and practice finding what makes your specific kid feel better and more stable.
4. Watch and pay attention to your child. Do they need time to regroup alone to feel better? Do they need human contact to feel better? Or something else? Figure out what helps them regain their composure and feel more stable.
5. Whenever your child is wiggling out, guide them into that behavior you identified that helps them feel better, and model asking for that behavior. Even if it feels like it's doing nothing to help in the moment, you're training your child to go to that comforting behavior when they feel bad.
6. Figure out your own healthy comfort behavior, and start making a conscious effort to ask for it when you're feeling stressed and weak yourself. Not only are you modeling for your kid, you're making yourself feel better AND you're helping the people you live with love you better. You're easy to love, but you're easier to love when you give people explicit instructions about how.

This age is exhausting and can make you feel like your parenting and your kid are going completely off the rails. They're not. It's all right on schedule, and you just have to hang on and keep showing up until the phase is over. The good news is that if you can survive this phase and use it to learn more about your kid, you'll be able to do the same thing with ages seven and 14 (the other two big emotional chaos stages) and you won't feel like you're doing a bad job then, either.

Courage.