



By Christa Melnyk Hines

Worried your child's Academy Award-worthy outbursts might earn her the tiara for neighborhood drama queen? Both boys and girls go through phases where they struggle with controlling their emotions. For a child, who is emotionally intense by nature, mindful parenting techniques can help her learn boundaries without repressing her feisty personality.

In her book *Raising Your Spirited Child*, author Mary Sheedy Kurcinka says intensity "is the invisible punch that makes every response of the spirited child immediate and strong. Managed well, intensity allows spirited children a depth and delight of emotion rarely experienced by others."

DEFINING DRAMA QUEEN.

The label is laced with negative connotation, but what is a so-called drama queen? "I would define a child

▣ **Find happy mediums.** An overly-sensitive child may imagine worst-case scenarios or inflate situations with friends. Point out when she may be overreacting to a situation. Also, make her aware when her fears weren't realized. "You were so upset and worried about the math test, but because of your hard work and persistence, you aced it."

Artful exuberance. The performing arts provide an appropriate outlet for dramatic children to exercise their expressive personalities. And relax if your child wants to wear yellow leggings and a bright blue, polka-dotted sweater paired with purple snow boots. As long as she makes choices with respect to your family's values and the school dress code, her non-conformist fashion sense is a harmless outlet for her creativity.

Set clear rules. Spirited kids will push, pull, and negotiate, seeking weakness in rules.

Articulate the rules in your home and consistently enforce them. Playful expression. Create space each day for your child to engage in unstructured activities. Through play he can decompress, engage his imagination, and process feelings.

Teach resilience. Acknowledge your child's feelings, but avoid overreacting. Listen, empathize, and ask your child how she could solve the problem. If there's no real solution, rather than feeding the drama by over-sympathizing with your child, calmly respond, "Oh well. That happens sometimes."

Soothing time alone. A calendar crammed with too many activities and playdates can set any child up for meltdowns. Set aside 30 minutes or more of quiet time during the day for reading, playing alone, or engaging in a creative endeavor. If your child has trouble starting off on a project on his own, put together an "Imagination Bucket" filled with art supplies, textured materials like play-dough, pipe cleaners, puffy stickers, or ribbons.

Note outside influences. Does your child seem especially moody and negative after being around a particular group of kids? Encourage your child to seek positive, upbeat friends who inspire self-confidence. In turn, guide your child toward being a caring friend to others.

Manage your drama. Exemplify calming, positive ways to manage your moods by counting out loud, deep breathing techniques, or stepping away from an emotional situation by taking a short time-out. "If the family dynamic is dramatic and volatile, the child, even as a baby, can absorb this as their norm of behaving," says Lisa Bahar, a licensed family therapist and clinical counselor. "This generally comes with issues not being resolved, arguments that escalate to yelling, and difficulty maintaining emotions."

Tap positive media. Read books, watch movies and TV shows, and attend live performances together that feature children who may be dramatic in nature, but don't act like divas. Check out *Olivia* by Ian Falconer; a popular young children's book series about a pig with a penchant for drama. Bahar recommends Disney films that "encourage the innocence of life" such as *Miracle on 34th Street*, *E.T.*, and *Fantasia*.

Accept your child's individuality. Understand that your child may just need to process his or her feelings in a more intense way. "Keep tissues on hand and don't shame them for using

them," says one mom of a dramatic 10-year-old. "Don't let other people shame them either. Accept more frequent tears as part of who they are and crying won't become problematic. My daughter always feels better after she cries. She processes her feelings faster than anyone I know!"

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