Conflicts can result in very strong feelings, not only for the participants in the dispute but also for the mediator and any observers of the conflict. These intense emotions may be constructive catalysts that generate dialogue, clarify issues, and strengthen relationships, or they may be obstacles that block communication and divide people from one another. Strong emotions may ignite verbal abuse and physical violence, or they may stimulate deep caring and connection. Sometimes the emotions of a conflict may generate a mixture of these results. One of the challenges of mediation is to encourage all parties to fully express their emotions, without verbal abuse or violence. Without this full expression, there can be no true resolution to conflict, yet the strong feelings themselves can interfere with problem solving. Mediators need to know what to do when either they or the children are feeling such strong emotions that successful problem solving could be compromised. The rest of this chapter describes ways to prepare for and respond to these challenging situations.
Intense feelings can be constructive catalysts that generate increased understanding of emotions...
careful thought about what is wanted...
and, eventually, communication that resolves the feelings and the issues.

Children’s Emotional Expressions:
What to Expect

To be prepared for the strong emotions that sometimes arise during children’s conflicts, we need to know more about what to expect when children become upset.
There are four basic, immediate ways that children express strong feelings:

- **Noises** — loud screams, grunting, shouts, or crying:
  
  *Keegan is playing with a toy truck when Jesse comes by and grabs it. Keegan screams and then begins to cry.*

  *Chris wants to be in the block area and there is no space for her. She yells, “Ahhhh!”*

- **Physical actions** — hurtful or expressive:
  
  *Angelica is playing with a toy truck and Jill grabs it. Angelica hits her on the back.*

  *Cory is carrying a doll and Dana pulls its arm. Cory pushes Dana away.*

- **Words** — appropriate or hurtful:
  
  *Xavier is playing with a car and Luke grabs it, yelling, “Mine!” Xavier says, “Hey, I was using that!”*

  *Dynell is painting and Wendy says, “That’s stupid!” Dynell says, “I’m not ever going to be your friend, you stupid dummy!”*

- **Withdrawal** — silent, or with quiet tears:
  
  *Lilly is using a red marker and Pat takes it. Lilly gets up and walks away.*

  *Sadie is painting at the art table, and Leela pours some paint on Sadie’s picture. Sadie cries quietly without moving.*

Sometimes there is a combination of these emotional responses, such as shouting followed by quick withdrawal, hitting while shouting hurtful words, or a constructive verbal response followed by a hurtful action. *If we keep in mind that all of these responses are possible and fully accept these possibilities, we will be less upset or surprised by children’s words and actions at conflict times. Such intense responses are developmentally appropriate for young children: Children hit and yell hurtful things because they have yet to learn other skills. As children transition from old strategies to new ones, they may initially use all of them at once! Keeping this in mind can help us resist labeling such mistaken actions, or the children, as “bad” or “selfish,” judgments that can impede problem solving and a full appreciation of the child’s emerging growth.*