

# Keep Calm to Think Straight

Your toddler is having a tantrum in the grocery store. Your four year old won't get dressed in the morning. Your fifth grader didn't do his chores... again! The feeling in your body tells you you're going to explode any minute. You're going to start yelling, threatening, name calling, or worse. But then the little voice in your head says, "Is this how I want my children to react when *they* feel under pressure and frustrated? What example am I setting?" It's okay to feel angry, but that voice is reminding you that your emotions don't need to dictate the way you react. When you're guiding your children to behave appropriately, you can also *choose to respond* in a way that shows them how grown-ups handle their emotions.

## Take care of yourself

In the heat of the moment, when children are not behaving the way you want, it's never easy to stay calm, respectful and connected to their needs. However, it won't be quite so hard if you've been looking after your own needs. Children tend to have a harder time controlling their behaviour when they are tired, hungry, lacking exercise, feeling rushed or overstimulated. The same is true for you. Take care of yourself so you can take care of your children.

If your habit is to let your frustration explode, it will take lots of practice to change from reacting to responding. At first it may feel unnatural; after all, your brain is building new circuits. Don't be too hard on yourself if it takes time to see change. Can you keep your temper when a demanding boss says something unfair? If so, you already have the necessary skills. You just need to apply them at home.

## Clear thinking

Children pay more attention to your body language and your tone of voice than to your words. When you look and sound stressed and anxious, your children can easily "catch" your mood. You may also be catching theirs. Like looking in a mirror, you may end up reflecting each other's emotional state. As the adult, you're the one who has the capacity to break the cycle and prevent things from getting worse.

No one thinks clearly in a highly emotional state, not children and not adults. In fact, brain imaging studies show that when the emotional part of the brain is highly aroused, activity declines in the part of the brain we use to think things through and solve complex problems. So the first step in finding a solution to a difficult situation is to lower the tension.

## Lowering the tension

There are a number of ways to stop a knee-jerk reaction and activate a well thought-out response.

- Know what triggers you. If you feel your child "pushes your buttons," remember that those buttons belong to *you*. Acknowledge them and stay in control of them.
- Notice the times in your day when things tend to fall apart. Make a plan for how the routine can go better.
- Recognize the start of your warning signals (feelings in your body, tone of voice, etc.) and put your plan into action.
- Concentrate more on calming your emotions than on controlling your child. Staying calm helps you stay in charge of the situation.
- Pause before you speak. Take three deep breaths or count to ten.
- Choose to look at something or make a gesture that will remind you to pause. Look at the ceiling. Touch your lips. Get your mind away from the triggering situation so you can step back and see the bigger picture.
- Send yourself a message: "I'm in my yellow zone. I'll take three breaths and stay away from the red zone."
- In your head, repeat a phrase to remind you of your goal: "Connect with the child before you correct his behaviour." "He's only four and hasn't mastered this skill yet." "What does she need now to get into her green zone?"
- Burn off the energy of frustration by moving: walk to the nearest door and back; run in place.
- If you can safely leave the child for a few minutes, take a parental time out. And promise to come back right away.
- Change the way you define the situation. Instead of taking things personally, try to imagine another way to look at their actions. If you see children's behaviour as a threat (to your authority, your image of yourself as a good parent, your ability to get to work on time), you go into defence mode and your stress hormones push you to react. To find a more effective response, you need to get your thinking brain working. Try pausing and asking yourself, "I wonder what's really behind this behaviour?" The answer may point you to a solution.

## Rewards for the relationship

Some parents may say, "But yelling and threatening work! My kids do what I want." This may be true: the children feel intimidated and submit out of fear. But what lesson did you teach them about how to solve problems that involve strong emotions? Your ability to lower the intensity will give you the opportunity to reinforce your connection and strengthen everyone's ability to build healthy relationships.

by Betsy Mann