

Are you setting intentions or getting set up?

Much of life is out of our control. As much as we would like it to be different, other people are out of our control. Many of our relational problems arise because we want others to be the way we want them to be, but we expect them to accept us the way we are. Never more true than in a parent/child relationship. The holidays have brought families together along with family disputes both spoken and unspoken.

When we are with our parents, we are compelled to fall back into the patterns we have been in since childhood. And we are now setting patterns with our children that they will continue to live out. We have no control over others but we do have control over ourselves—we can change the patterns with our parents and set healthy ones with our children.

Usually we unconsciously spend each day not wanting but allowing our emotions to lead us. Life presents itself, and we roll with the punches, drop into bed exhausted and think, *life shouldn't be like this*. We let life set us up, and too often it sets us up for what we don't want. But with little effort, and a good deal of practice, we can set our intentions on what we want and help our children do the same.

There is a big difference between setting intentions and trying to get your child to do what you want. In the first case, you are giving your child control and in the second you are taking it from her. Setting intentions means to anticipate an upcoming situation and problem-solve it. "Remember the last time we went to the supermarket, and you got really mad because I wouldn't buy those cookies, and you cried, and I got really upset? When we're there today what do you think we could do differently so that doesn't happen?" The trick is not to tell your child what to do but let her think it through. Negotiate and make suggestions but if she leads the process, chances are patterns can change.

“Last weekend when you went off with your friends, you forgot about the time and your curfew, came in really late, and we blew up at you. How can we change it so that doesn’t happen tomorrow?” It seems simplistic but can be very powerful. If your child doesn’t partake in the discussion or says, “I don’t know,” that tells you that he has no idea that he can take control of his experience, that he is stuck in a pattern with you. He is used to, even though resistant to, you telling him what to do. Acknowledge that and say you want to turn things around.

Before heading into a situation with your child, talk to yourself about how you want to handle it. Instead of thinking, *she never listens and refuses to do what I say*, think, *how can I help her make a good decision?* In order to engage your child in problem-solving, you have to be neutral, so never get into it in the heat of the moment. Wait until emotions are down and revisit it. But first talk to yourself about her agenda and try to get into her head. State what happened as neutrally as possible and then, “If we had it to over again, how do you think we could both get what we want? If I had said... instead of what I did, what would you say / do? If that had happened, how could we have resolved it?” This can happen in the car, while you’re getting dinner together, at bedtime, it doesn’t take any more time and will actually save a lot of time fighting and arguing in the long run.

Anticipate a situation with one of your parents. For instance every time your mother calls, she criticizes something, you get defensive, she gets hurt and you end up feeling guilty and angry. Anticipate the phone call and understand that you can’t change her, but you can change how you respond to her. Tell yourself not to take it personally and plot out a conversation in your head writing the script of what you would like to say that would stop the inevitable direction of the conversation. Something like, “I appreciate your concern for me and know you wish things could be different. What I need most from you is your support and understanding.” Something totally different can be enough to break the pattern. You can also go over a situation that happened in the past. “Dad, I got very upset when you said...and I said... which I know you didn’t like either. I

think what we both wanted was.... How do you think we could do that?" In the heat of the moment, it's too difficult to get there. Setting your intention ahead of time for the next scene or going back over an old one can give you a plan and the strength to give it a try. Write it down. Say it in different ways. Practice and perhaps you'll do better than you think. It's so worth changing patterns that only make you feel inept or enraged. Take control of your thoughts, make a plan, set an intention. If you can do it, teach it to your child. What a gift. Imagine if our heads of state could do it!