

The Calm instead of the Storm

Every time I hear a success story from a parent, it usually includes the words calm or patient or understanding. “I was so much calmer and more understanding of him than I had been before.” “It can be as simple as having your child know you understand that really makes a difference.” “Many times I have to leave the room for a time out so I can come back calmer so I can express myself.” “Staying calm makes it really empowering to see the problem clearly so it can be addressed.”

It’s in that calm where we find objectivity and a realistic perspective. And it is there where we will know the best thing to do in the situation at hand. When our button has been pushed, when we feel angry and resentful, guilty or frustrated with what our child is “doing to us” or we’re afraid of who this child will become, or who we have already become. Then we go on emotional overload and react. But calmness is more than just not reacting. We can say things very quietly and intentionally through gritted teeth. We hold ourselves back. Resistance involved. We are not calm and our children know it.

Calm involves actually being in the present moment with your child. It means not identifying yourself or your child with the past (experiences, preconceived notions, expectations) or the future (fears of what this will lead to). Both the past (our memory of it) and the future (our projections into it) are mind-made and keep us stuck in perceptions that are neither helpful nor supportive of our children who are expressing something right now. We need to be able to stop our minds from being hijacked by our thoughts and judgments so we can be there right now, not off in the past or future.

Let’s face it. No matter what, we love our children—even if sometimes we don’t like them! We get as angry as we do *because* we love them so much. More than any other human being. We have stake in their futures, which is why their teachers can remain more neutral than we can ever hope to be. They don’t care with the intensity that we do.

To be the best teachers we can be for our children, we need to cultivate calm. Calm is that empty space where, at least for the moment, we let go of any preconceived ideas, judgments, and perceptions—where we are truly present, willing to listen, willing to hear, and willing to see things differently. One parent

put it this way, “I stopped myself, realizing that my thoughts are my own and not because of my child. I have a choice in how to respond or react. I can choose to keep doing what I always do and expect different results (the definition of insanity) or I can begin to see a different perspective.”

Most of us however, keep doing what we always do expecting our children to change. We expect that they are finally going to get it and do what we want. In other words, we are expecting them to be the grown-up first. We want them to show us they are worthy of our respect before we’ll give it. We want them to step out of the power struggle first and calm down so that we can. This is backwards. We are the grown-ups, remember.

To cultivate calm, we need to first understand some basic principles about children, behavior, and cooperation—and then put those principles into practice. In other words, *we* need to do the learning and then set an example of calmness. Children do not misbehave because they want to. No child enjoys being manipulative or out of control. They misbehave when they are having a problem or a need is not being met. If we can see it through this lens, we will take their behavior far less personally, feel some understanding and compassion rather than anger or exasperation, and can detach enough to say, “She’s having a problem how can I help,” or “He’s showing me that he’s feeling out of control. Am I fueling that in any way?” Even in the face of very inappropriate behavior, we will be able to gain the calm we need *only* if we can see this perspective.

We don’t want to acknowledge that we are in any way part of the problem. After all, how often was that modeled for us? Parents are always right—right? It’s hard to watch your child behaving defiantly and think about the problem she is having when all you can see is the problem you are having. But when you stay with your problem, the one she is creating, you will be flooded with emotion and calm will be out of reach.

A mother said to me today, “I’m afraid I’m always going to have this problem with my daughter (who’s three!), and I won’t ever like her.” I said it’s 100% up to you.