

When Your Kids Push Your Buttons

By Bonnie Harris

We all know the feeling. Our child says or does that certain something, we see red and react in ways we regret. We feel out of control, blame the child, and set up our next power struggle. We “go on automatic” and lose our maturity and authority. But we have a choice. We can either punish our child for pushing our buttons or take a look at what our buttons are, why we react the way we do, and take responsibility for our behavior—like an adult.

You know your button has been pushed when:

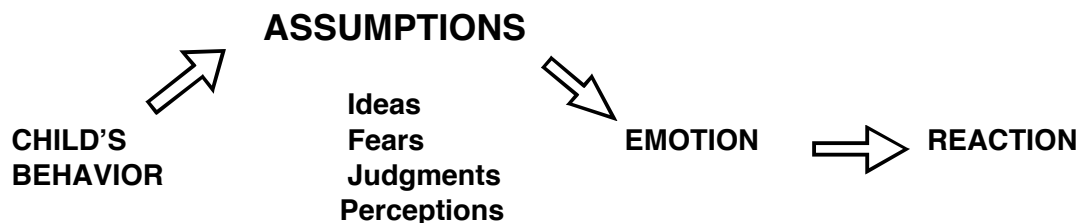
- You engage in the “Road Rage of Parenting”
- You hear your mother or father saying those words you swore you never would
- You feel enraged, hopeless, guilty, resentful, etc.
- You catastrophize and project your child into the future
- You know you could never have gotten away with what your child just did

Our child’s behavior triggers an old wound. Our buttons were planted long ago from messages we took in from our parents’ reactions to us. Those old painful emotions get tapped, it hurts, and we retaliate—but we don’t realize what’s happening. To stop this automatic reaction, first we must recognize that our reactions are caused by our own perceptions.

We believe that our child’s behavior causes our feelings and reactions. “You make me so mad. How many times do I have to yell before you’ll listen?” The unintended message sent is *you are responsible for my emotions and my behavior*. We leave out a critical piece—the assumptions we make.

The **assumptions**—perceptions, thoughts, and judgments—we make about ourselves or our children (*He never listens, She’s so mean, I’m a terrible mother*) are the culprits that provoke our emotions. We feel mad because we have fears and thoughts that hijack our emotions. Reactions inevitably follow.

The Emotional Chain Reaction:



Your behavior makes me THINK you are being mean and AFRAID I have not taught you how to behave properly. It is this PERCEPTION that causes me to FEEL angry and then to REACT.

Reframing our Assumptions:

We can't change our feelings, but we can change our thoughts—the assumptions that provoke our emotions and reactions. No one can “make” us mad. We can reframe our assumption from **my child is *being* a problem, to my child is *having* a problem**. The result is a 180 degree switch in perception, a shift from anger to compassion.

If a child yells, “You’re so stupid”, it’s because the child feels frustrated by something. If it pushes a button, the adult may react with, “Don’t you ever talk to me like that! Who do you think you are?!” The parent feels threatened and has taken it personally. She may have experienced a parent, sibling, or teacher making remarks like, “What are you stupid or something?” or “That’s not a very smart thing to say” enough times that the message sticks—*I’m stupid, I’m not good enough*. If no button gets pushed, the parent can acknowledge, “You wish I would say something different. You don’t like it when I ask you to do something you don’t want to do” and then redirect the child appropriately. This parent is not taking the child’s remark personally and can remain objective. She sees it as it is—an expression of frustration or powerlessness and deals with it maturely.

When your button gets pushed:

1. Stop, walk away, do nothing (yet)
2. Breathe deeply at least 3 times
3. Wait until both you and your child are calm
4. Go back over the situation and problem solve (do a “do-over”)

To defuse your button:

1. Name your feelings
2. Identify the assumption you made to cause those feelings
3. Reframe your assumption from a judgment to an observation
4. Your reframed assumption should prompt compassion instead of anger

There are many layers to the defusing process that can be found in my book, “When Your Kids Push Your Buttons”. When your buttons are defused you will no longer be driven by your emotions and reactions. You can respond instead of react and be the parent you always expected to be.

Bonnie is the director of Connective Parenting www.connectiveparenting.com and is available for speaking events, phone counseling, and parenting workshops. She has authored two books, "When Your Kids Push Your Buttons" and "Confident Parents, Remarkable Kids". You can follow her work through her newsletter and on facebook or contact her by emailing bh@bonnieharris.com.

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