

## Staying Calm When Your Child Is Upset

You are probably the most significant player in the drama of your “upset child.” How you respond will either heighten the intensity of your child’s reaction or lessen it. You can either be the stick of dynamite that gets thrown into the burning building, or you can be the fire retardant that reduces the flames. You can choose to withdraw your “emotional oxygen”—or you can add it to the fire, thereby intensifying its heat. Staying calm in the midst of your child’s fire storm will be your greatest strength, your most effective tool as a parenting firefighter. It is also probably one of the most challenging skills you will ever be asked to develop.

To stay calm, you will need to observe your reactions, understand yourself, and be able to predict just how you get drawn into your child’s distress. I have drawn ideas from the books, *Dealing with Disappointment* (2003) by Elizabeth Crary and *Kid Cooperation* (1996) by Elizabeth Pantley to help you find some solutions.

Read on...

*Move from blaming your child  
to taking responsibility for  
yourself and your reactions.*

### 1. Why Stay Calm?

Why even work on trying to stay calm when your child is upset? Understanding the big picture can help you fight against getting emotionally “hooked.”

**Your child can’t learn emotional regulation.** You can’t teach your child to calm himself down and help him learn the important skill of emotional regulation if you aren’t calm yourself. That’s just how emotional learning happens. You have to self-regulate in order for your child to internalize the skill. Children learn from their experiences with the people they love the most. They take in the emotional messages and the emotional skills they *experience*, and these become hard-wired into their brains. If you engage in a pattern of crisis reactions, your anger and dysregulation will actually get scripted into the emotional wiring of your child’s brain. He will eventually respond automatically, in an identical way, whenever he is frustrated.

**Your child feels too powerful.** When your child can provoke your anger and generate an intense surge of out-of-control emotion, life feels unsafe for him. Children can feel *too* big and become frightened by their own power when both they and their parent are out of control. This inflated sense of power can be psychologically troubling for children who need the reassurance that a caring adult is strong enough to protect them from their own impulses. When *both* of you are angry and out of control, children feel doubly uncertain. Oddly enough, the more parents get emotionally out-of-control, the harder children push. They are desperate for us to stand up and take charge.

**It’s not effective.** Simply put, anger doesn’t work! It only causes children to resist or rebel. Their thinking brain shuts down. Instead of being open to problem-solving, they become preoccupied with the cloud of emotions (usually fear, anger, resentment, getting even, etc.) that envelops them. It has been shown that children develop best with a strong parental structure. They need the loving enclosure of limits to push up against so that they know just how far they can go and when they have gone too far. They need to feel that someone bigger is able to STOP them when they are not able to stop themselves. This gives them the comfort and trust that their world is safe, that they know what to expect, and that the people they need and love the most are predictable.

**You feel guilty.** We often carry a great deal of guilt and shame in the area of anger and its expression. Any parent will tell you (when they are being brutally honest), that they feel horribly ashamed after “losing it” with their child. Sometimes their guilt prompts them to become more lax and “soft” in their parenting for a while, in reparation for “crossing the line.” This is even more mystifying to their child—and adds to their child’s confusion. Other parents merely add their guilt to the inner stockpile of self-defeating feelings that they carry around within themselves. Sadly, their child pays the price, because sooner or later that parent will need to discharge his or her negative energy. Who will be the target? The child—who is both vulnerable and readily available!

## 2. Identify Your Emotional Triggers

The more honest you are with yourself, the better parent you will be. So the challenge for each of us is clear: *Get real!* Get real observant, get real truthful, get real open to seeing what needs to be seen.

**Observe yourself.** The first step to change is becoming AWARE. Watch yourself. Notice when you become unglued. What state are you in? Are you “**Hungry, Angry, Lonely, or Tired**” (also known as HALT in 12-step programs). It is strongly suggested that you **HALT** and fix these situations before you take *any* actions or make any decisions. When we are in these states, we are at risk for making very poor choices, often ones that we will regret later. Also observe your child. Where are the worst times and why?

**Identify your PRESENT issues.** Many times the anger we take out on our children has nothing whatsoever to do with them. We may have had a bad night’s sleep, an argument with our spouse, or a rough day at work. Our child may be engaging in some perfectly normal (but annoying) preschool behavior, but it’s the wrong time for us! In a flash, we aim our anger at our unsuspecting child. (We call this the “kick the dog” syndrome.) At other times, our child may be truly misbehaving, and “their misbehavior triggers our anger release button,” says Elizabeth Pantley, parent educator. She notes that our child’s behavior is then “added to our growing pile-up of other angers, which distorts our response. So, rather than having an appropriate reaction to the situation at hand, we explode with all our pent-up anger from so many other issues” (p. 140).

**Where is the current stress in your life?** Is it emanating from financial worries, work troubles, or difficulties in your relationships? Are you emotionally exhausted from dealing with your personal problems? Are these stresses draining your “emotional bank account”? When you add a distressed child to the mix, your remaining emotional resources may be exhausted.

**What’s the cure for emotional exhaustion?** Getting the help you need. Find a therapist, see a financial counselor, or plan time-outs. (See more ideas at the end of the newsletter.) When you are dealing with *your* problems, you will be able to deal with your child’s distress more easily.

**Know your PAST and how it’s affecting you.** The issues of our children that are easy or difficult for us will depend on the inner struggles we are currently contending with and whether or not we have made peace with our own past. The ghosts of our past reveal themselves to us in our relationships, especially with our children. All of us tend to repeat with our children the things we vowed to avoid. We do this because we’re *unconscious*—it’s out of our awareness. When awareness wakes us up and we see more clearly, then we can change how we respond.

● ● ●  
If you grew up in a household where your parents yelled at you, you might feel angry and helpless when your child yells at you.

● ● ●  
If your older sister was mean to you, you might get very angry when your older child is mean to your younger child.

### BECOME A CONSCIOUS PARENT

In order to stay calm when your child becomes upset, you will need to become extremely self-aware.

That means being able to step back and reflect on yourself and your reactions.

It means understanding your past and present triggers.

**What are you bringing from your own childhood into your parenting?** We often identify with our children in ways that are shaped by the roles in our childhood families. If we were a leader or follower, dependable or flighty, we may replay the original role in the family we create. We may align with the child who takes on our birth order position. We may also have conflict with the child who takes the position of the sibling we experienced the most difficulty with. We may over-identify with a child who has a strength we wished we had as a child. Or, just as likely, we may rub up against the child who carries that certain quality we don’t like/or fear

in ourselves. Remember to take notice when you have an intense, negative reaction, particularly one that persists over time. It may be something in your child that you don't like in yourself.

**How anger was handled in our family of origin will often get passed on to us and then to our children.** If anger was an unacceptable emotion in our family, we will often come to parenthood believing that anger is an unhealthy emotion and should be stifled. Or, we may allow it, but we will not have learned the skills that will help us deal with it. Even more troublesome, we may be unprepared for handling the force of our *own* anger when pushed to the limit with our child. Similarly, if we grew up with a parent who was often angry, we may find ourselves unconsciously repeating these patterns—or having difficulty tolerating anger in our child. Despite the fact that we carry pain from these experiences and we vow to “do it differently,” we tend to repeat what was done to us unless we recognize the pattern and work to correct it.

**Know where you are vulnerable.** What we cherish or criticize about our children will depend in large part on what we are comfortable or shaky with in ourselves. Try to do an honest appraisal. What gets in your way? Do you need to feel appreciated? Do you need a lot of physical affection? Do you need to hear that your child loves you? Are you easily hurt? Do you get overwhelmed easily? Are you susceptible to feeling judgment from others? Do you feel your child's feelings almost as though they were your own? Do you worry about disappointing your child, because you don't want her to feel pain?

Every time you have difficulty saying “no” to your child because it will hurt *you*, or every time you feel your child's pain so strongly that *you* become overwhelmed by it, it's a red flag. Stop and reflect. It can be a sign that you are having trouble seeing your child as separate from yourself. Those of us who were wounded by parental anger as a child may experience our child's anger as a *personal* assault. We may feel hurt (“he doesn't love me”), rather than seeing his anger as a normal expression of his frustration or his push for independence.

### 3. Remain Emotionally Separate

How challenging it is to keep our boundaries separate. As parents, most of us can easily get caught up in our children's joys and frustrations. How many of us have heard our child come home and say, “*\_\_\_\_\_ doesn't want to be my friend?*”? Every parent feels empathy for their child's sadness at such a moment, but for some, it can bring back more intense feelings, reminding them of the pain of their own childhood rejections. Or, if you have dreams of your child following a certain path, it can be devastating when your child fails to live out that vision (i.e.: your child isn't very social and resists group activities, or he doesn't get picked for the sports team, or he turns out to be more interested in art than academics). You may find yourself feeling angry at your child and *personally* offended. It can be hard to stay calm and separate at these times.

Ask yourself...  
“Is this my problem?”  
“Who created the problem?”  
“Whose needs are being met?”

#### Is this my problem?

Elizabeth Crary suggests that you ask yourself, “*Is this my problem?*” or “*Who created the problem?*” or “*Whose needs are being met?*” if you find yourself wanting to get involved in your child's problem. When parents become over emotionally-involved in their children's lives, they can easily lose their way. They literally become small children again, seeing and feeling things as child, rather than maintaining their adult perspective. Crary reminds us that this emotional reaction hinders our ability to offer our children the necessary support they need at such times. Remember, too, that children take their cues from us. If we are profoundly distressed, our children will think things are really, *truly* horrible. They will respond by becoming more anxious and upset.

#### Think before saying, “I'm sorry.”

We need to look at the words we use. “Remaining emotionally separate means acknowledging your child's feelings--without introducing your own,” says Crary. One way we insert our feelings, she cautions, is by saying, “*I'm sorry that...*” (Ex: “*I'm sorry that your friend was so mean.*”) By inserting the “*I'm sorry,*” we have switched

##### Rather that saying....

“*I'm sorry Melissa didn't invite you to her birthday party.*”

##### Say instead...

“*I can see you are hurt that Melissa didn't invite you to her party.*”

the focus from *our child's* feelings to our *own* feelings. When this happens, our child often starts to worry about *us*, as well as her own problem! If, on the other hand, you really have done something hurtful or wrong--such as mistakenly blaming a child for breaking something or yelling and losing control,

then it's completely appropriate to apologize to your child. Saying, "I'm sorry I yelled at you. It wasn't your fault." will teach and model respect.

**Know if you are too involved.**

Most of us have read of the research which shows that children whose parents who are involved do better in school. So it's a good thing to be "invested in your child's well-being." However, it's another thing to be *so* involved that your actions discourage your child from learning or shield him from experiencing the natural consequences of his behaviors. Elizabeth Crary suggests you evaluate your level of involvement by looking at these questions:

**Get Real! Are You ~~Over~~-Involved?**  
 Three Questions to Ask Yourself:

(1) **Do you give in to help your child before she has tried to resolve the issue herself?**  
*(Do you defend her? Smooth her path? Do something for her that she could really do herself?)*

(2) **Do you grant your child's wishes or requests, even when they are difficult or inconvenient for you?**  
*(When children consistently get what they want, they believe it's everyone's job to please them.)*

(3) **Is your child your primary source of pleasure?**  
*(It's good to delight in your child's accomplishments, but is he your main source of emotional fuel?)*

By being "too loving" (too protective), we can really end up hurting our child. The danger of making children 'too precious' is that they do not learn to negotiate and set aside their needs for others. They develop a growing sense of entitlement.

*(For more on this subject, read [The Too Precious Child: The Perils of Being a Super-Parent and How to Avoid Them](#) by Lynne Williams or [The Blessings of a Skinned Knee](#) by Dr. Wendy Mogel. Or, go to our Mandala website and read my archived newsletter, "The Blessings of a Skinned Knee: Parenting with Confidence and Building Character in an Indulgent Age.")*

#### 4. Remain In Charge of Your Own Feelings

Anger can cover a very broad range of emotions, from mild irritation to uncontrollable rage, as you can see in the box below. But not all anger is destructive or bad. Mild forms of anger can move us to change, acting as an impetus to solve problems and find solutions. Anger in these situations gives us the energy to move into action. As our emotions become more extreme, though, they become harder to control. Out-of-control anger rarely leads to any positive change. The real challenge with our anger is maintaining control from the start! If we don't put on the brakes, we can quickly escalate from Level 1 to Level 6— completely bypassing the point where we can use our emotions in a productive way. Even more important, the more out of control a parent gets, the angrier a child gets! Elizabeth Pantley describes it beautifully: "It's like they are on two sides of a rolling snowball, heading for a crash at the bottom of a mountain" (p.151).

The more out of control I get, the ANGRIER my child becomes!

LEVELS of ANGER					
1	2	3	4	5	6
Displeasure	Annoyance	Irritation	Exasperation	Rage	Fury

**Did you know that if YOU are angry, it's really *your* problem?** What? That's not what many of us think. But communication theory makes clear this principle: "WHEN WE ARE ANGRY, WE OWN THE PROBLEM." Yet many of us blame our anger on the other person. We carry this mistaken belief around in our heads. We think that that when our children misbehave, they *make* us angry. We say, "YOU make me so mad!"

**No one can really "make" us angry.** It is not our child's misbehavior that makes us angry because our child's actions cannot *make* us feel or do anything. We're in charge of our own feelings and actions. Elizabeth Pantley, in *Kid Cooperation*, says we actually allow our anger to formulate. "You create your own anger by the way you

interpret your child's behavior." She insists that the first step in anger control is accepting responsibility for your own anger! Otherwise, we unwittingly 'feed and grow' our anger. As anger begins to grow inside us, it prevents rational thought. The thinking part of our brain actually shuts down. Faulty beliefs enter in. We label our child's behavior as intentional, rather than seeing it as a natural part of developing and learning. Negative thoughts cause angry emotions to quickly spiral out of control.

REMEMBER...  
I am responsible  
for my OWN anger!

## 5. Maintain Your Self-Esteem

Parenting can challenge your self-esteem—especially if your child has angry outbursts and yells hurtful things. Anger usually arises when our self-esteem is threatened. Can you identify what threatens you most? It's not healthy to look to your child to make you feel good. Instead, work on yourself. Find ways to fill your emotional bank account so your child doesn't have to be the only person or thing making deposits.

**Brace yourself for "I hate you!"** Many parents find that hearing those dreaded words, "*I HATE you!*" tears their heart out and wounds them to the core. Others find that listening to their child's deep, wrenching sobs pushes them over the edge. If you need your child to love YOU (to make *you* feel good), then this will be your soft spot. You risk becoming immobilized by your own distress (either anger or hurt), which will prevent you from seeing the situation clearly and responding appropriately.

"Go away.  
I hate you!"

What does this really mean?

Maybe it just means,  
"I am having a lot of fun  
right now and I don't want  
to go home yet."

**All children seize words that have power and intensity when they are feeling powerless.** All children will tell their parents that they "hate" them at some point or other. Get ready for that. Does it mean your child truly hates you? Absolutely not! It does mean that in that particular moment of emotional intensity, your child is angry/frustrated/powerless/helpless/overwhelmed or out of control, and he or she is trying to let you know that. It also means that your child may be testing you and your reaction: "Can I get the upper hand in this way? Do my words have the power to wound you? Do you have the emotional strength to be bigger and stronger than my feelings?"

**Is your "loveableness" or "capableness" being threatened?** When you are feeling angry, ask yourself: *Am I feeling unloved or incapable?* Often, this is what's going on. When we try to be patient or we try to use good parenting skills and our child *still* gets upset—or *still* repeats the offensive behavior—it's easy to feel incompetent or unloved, especially if this is an emotional "hook" for us. Step back. Remind yourself that many of the things you will try over the years will backfire or fail. Your child is on a long learning curve. (It takes a lifetime!) That's the challenge of parenting. But it does not mean that you are incompetent or unloved.

## 6. Take Care of Yourself

Do you need to **ACT ON** something you can change? Or, do you need to **LET GO** of something that you can't change? Elizabeth Crary suggests that we can "be broken" in either of these two places. Here are some things that can help.

**Talk to someone.** It really helps to talk to someone outside your situation who can listen attentively and non-judgmentally, acknowledge your feelings, and help you sort out your choices. Just "telling your story" has value as an emotional release mechanism that reduces body stress levels. Choose someone who has a good "ear" for listening, such as a trusted friend, relative, pastor, counselor, or family therapist.

**Check your facts.** Often, we have knee-jerk reactions! We make quick assumptions and then get angry, but it's based on incorrect information. What's really going on? What are the real facts? What's typical for this age?

**Revise your expectations of yourself.** Buddhism teaches that expectation is the root of unhappiness. Think about it. Our anger and stress very often come from our *unrealistic* expectations. Are you constantly judging and criticizing yourself? The moment you start judging, you find something to be unhappy about. Many times, we are trying to do too much too well. We expect ourselves to do it all: keep a perfect home, serve healthy meals, raise perfectly behaved kids, arrange play dates and stimulating activities for our children, maintain a fulfilling intimate relationship, sustain new and old friendships, and—for many—also keep a satisfying career or work-life going. Sometimes, we have to let go. We may need to let some things slide. We may need to scale back our vision of

what we think we need to have for “the good life.” Many people find that when they let go of the expectations, their stress level diminishes. They have more energy to cope. They don’t get angry as easily.

**Revise your expectations of your child.** Unrealistic expectations can also trip us up in day-to-day parenting, as well. We often expect our children to be able to manage too many “tasks” in too short a time. Are you rushing your child the way you are rushing yourself? Get to know what is truly realistic for a child who is your child’s age. It is *unreasonable* to expect a toddler or preschooler to manage multiple errands, social visits, demands for quiet sitting, etc. without lots of breaks and opportunities to touch, feel, and move his body. Are you running your agenda and forgetting your child’s developmental agenda? Are you judging your child by impossible standards? Is your vision of family life colored by “rose colored glasses”? Talk to someone who can help you be realistic.

**Say “No” when you need to.** “Look closely at what you are doing for other people,” suggests Elizabeth Pantley. Women, in particular, have difficulty in this area. They’re affirmed from early on for their helpfulness. Research even shows that their brains are hard-wired to “tend and befriend.” But Pantley reminds us that “we can’t nurture the whole world.” So reign in your guilt. Stop and think carefully before giving in, whether it’s to your child’s nagging demands, to someone else, or to a new activity. Buy yourself some time to pause and think by saying these magic words, “*Can I get back to you about that?*” Or, try practicing, “*I’d love to, but I just don’t have the time.*” People will actually respect your “No” if you are clear. Taking care of your needs—and preserving your energy—are vitally important, especially if you are trying to learn to manage your anger.

**Plan time for yourself.** Find some sort of personal time for YOU! This is not a time for doing what you “should” be doing. It’s time to renew your energy, your inner spirit. What activity or practice offers that to you? Some people get up 15 minutes earlier in the morning just to have a cup of coffee in silence. Others find a peaceful spot to retreat to. Some make a commitment to get to the gym on certain days—no matter what. Others walk with a friend while their kids are in school. If we don’t get this kind of mental replenishment *on a consistent basis*, our children pay a heavy price. When we are depleted and worn thin, we simply cannot stay calm during the stressful times with our children.

**Change your thinking.** Cognitive behavioral therapists say, “To change your attitude is to change your life.” Use positive self-talk. Monitor what you say about yourself—out loud and inside, too. Self-talk can change your mind and change your feelings about a situation. “*I’m a lousy parent*” or “*I can never do anything right*” can actually make things worse. You draw negative energy to you, and you have less positive energy to put towards mastering the situation. Practice listening to your talk—and reframing it with a positive statement. Here are some ideas...

“To change your ATTITUDE is to change your life.”

#### CHANGE YOUR INNER DIALOGUE...

My house is a mess. I am a rotten housekeeper.

*I choose to spend time with my children.  
I can clean house when company is coming.*

Alex always cries when I try to help him. I can never do anything right.

*I am a capable person, even when my child gets upset with me.  
I am trying different ways of working with my child.*

I can’t get anywhere on time. I’m always late.

*I can arrive on time when it’s important to me.  
I was on time to the doctor’s appointment today.*

If I were a good parent, Megan wouldn’t get so angry all the time.

*I’m a good parent, even though Megan gets angry at me.  
I am learning new ways to talk to Megan.*

I must be a bad parent. My child still wets the bed/has tantrums/or\_\_\_\_\_.

*I have taken my child to the doctor to see if something is physically wrong.  
I am a loveable, capable parent even though my daughter wets her bed.*

**Reach out and Get help.** Read a book, join a parenting group, take an anger management class, try a Yoga workshop, find a wise parenting mentor, or pursue personal counseling. Work on yourself. Do anything that helps you gain new information so that you can shift your behavior or change your response to a situation.

## 7. Use Calming Techniques

One of the most valuable resources you can develop as a parent are ways to calm yourself *before* you get angry and lose control--of your mouth, your hands, or the situation. Each of us needs to find ways that work for us with our unique temperament.

### Examples of Calming Strategies:

- Reach out to compassionate others
- Talk to yourself
- Talk to others
- Express emotions (tears, anger)
- Self-soothe (calm self)
- Perspectivize (look at the situation a different way)
- Stop Personalizing (resist the urge to label a behavior “intentional”)
- Externalize (take a step back)
- Overcome problems in small ways

We need **Quick Self-Calming Strategies** for instant use in those situations where we must act promptly get ourselves into a coping space. We need to be able to put the “oxygen mask” on ourselves first, *before* we try to calm our child!

We also need to build into our lives **Preventative Calming Strategies** for reducing our stress levels. These can become healthy habits that we intentionally choose to engage in, much like taking a vitamin on a regular basis to prevent illness. Think of these as general calming tools. Crary calls these restorative ways of “reducing the tension between storms.”

For specific stress-reducing ideas, turn to the *Calming Strategies* handout at the end of this newsletter.

## 8. Reduce Clutter

Elizabeth Crary makes the point that clutter and confusion create a background of stress. When things are going smoothly, clutter doesn't normally cause a problem. It's when tempers get short or we are suddenly in a time crunch that the clutter adds stress! Every time you decrease clutter, says Crary, you decrease the need to rescue your child in those frantic “*I can't find...*” or “*I need...*” moments. It will be easier, then, for you to remain separate and not get ‘hooked.’ Crary points out that reducing clutter has two elements: creating order and maintaining it.

**Create order.** Children do best when they know where everything belongs and where to find things. It helps a child to know that he can find his crayons in this bin or hunt for his pajamas in this drawer. Or, jackets get hung on the peg first thing and shoes always come off and go by the side of the front door. “*A place for everything and everything in its place*” is still a helpful motto. Interestingly, it was the cornerstone of Maria Montessori's philosophy. In an ordered environment, children learn to take great pride in caring for their environment themselves and also being responsible for it. Use routines whenever you can to help organize your life—and your child's life.

“A place for everything and everything in its place.”

**Maintain order.** At Mandala, children learn to return materials to their designated place after they have completed an activity (or “played” with it). Children can learn to do the same thing at home. With a place for everything and everything in its place, it is easier for a child to follow through. Parents need to help children develop the habit, but over time children learn to develop an *internal* sense of order that will help them throughout their lifetime. Three hints for keeping things orderly: (1) limit the amount of stuff you collect, (2) develop the habit of putting things away, and (3) use open shelving with bins, baskets, or even labeled tubs. Some parents find it helpful to limit by number or volume; for example, “one basket of cars,” or “one doll for every year of age.” Others find the “*One In, One Out*” Rule helpful. Every time you buy or bring in something new, you or your child chooses something for the give-away box. Another terrific idea is the “periodic rotation” plan where you recycle toys in and out of storage. Parents report that children respond to their long-forgotten toys with the enthusiasm of Christmas morning all over again!

## 9. Develop an Action Plan

Watch for patterns. Both children and adults often have some consistency to their meltdowns. Look back at when you get angry. Is it when you are trying to get kids out the door in the morning? Or is it the harrowing

“pre-dinner hour” at night? It really helps to have a plan, insists Crary. That’s the way to remain calm and separate. Your plan needs two elements: (1) Ways to deal with the situation and (2) Ways to calm yourself.

### Plan for dealing with situations.

Brainstorm, suggests Crary, and generate lots of ideas when you are dealing with a frustrating situation. She uses a five-point approach: **Avoid the problem, Set appropriate limits, Teach new skills, Acknowledge feelings, and Respond to cooperation.** In the box below, you will see how she uses these five points to create a plan for dealing with a whining child.

<b>My Whining Child</b> Brainstorming Ideas	
<b>Problem:</b>	Your three and a half year-old whines whenever he wants you to do something for him.
<b>Avoid the Problem</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>· Go for a run each day to reduce stress for both of you.</li><li>· Buy ear plugs and use them to reduce the volume of whining.</li></ul>
<b>Set Age-Appropriate Limits</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>· Say, “When you whine, the answer will be ‘NO.’” <i>(Note: You must be willing to follow through with the consequences, or this will not work.)</i></li><li>· Give a consequence: “If you whine, you must leave the room. You may return when you have a pleasant voice.”</li></ul>
<b>Teach New Skills</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>· Model speaking pleasantly—even when you feel upset.</li><li>· Break the task of speaking pleasantly into small steps:<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>(1) Identify unpleasant (whining) voices in other people.</li><li>(2) Notice when he is using a whiny voice.</li><li>(3) Ask him to change his voice when he starts to whine.</li><li>(4) Ask him to start speaking pleasantly.</li></ol></li><li>· Model re-doing it right. (i.e.: When you yell or whine, change your voice and say, “Oops, that was my whiny voice. This is my pleasant voice.”</li></ul>
<b>Acknowledge Feelings</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>· “You must be frustrated trying to tell me something.”</li><li>· “Wouldn’t it be fun if the whole kitchen was filled with cookies and you had to eat your way out?”</li></ul>
<b>Respond to Cooperation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>· Give him full attention when he is pleasant.</li><li>· Say, “Thank you so much for using a pleasant voice. Now I know what you want.”</li><li>· The first couple of times he asks without whining, give him what he wants immediately.</li></ul>

(To give you more ideas and increase your parenting repertoire for brainstorming, I suggest reading *Love and Limits* by E. Crary or *Kid Cooperation* by E. Pantley. They both offer lots of suggestions.)

**Plan for dealing with your feelings.** Next, you need to decide how you will calm yourself when you get angry or are upset. In some situations, you can *only* change how you respond—you simply cannot change the circumstances. It’s important, then, to figure out ahead of time some strategies to get control of yourself when your anger is rising or to calm yourself when your child is having a meltdown. Review the *Calm Strategies* at the end of this newsletter and find some that will work for you. Also, consider using Pantley’s *Four Steps to Staying Calm*. (1) **Stop. Breathe. Count,** (2) **See Yourself on Video,** (3) **Adjust your Expectations & Your Thinking,** and (4) **Use Skill.** (See box below.)

Remember, there are many stages leading up to full-blown anger. We can learn to recognize these signs in ourselves and take action to STOP ourselves from letting things escalate. The common signs of anger are rapid breathing,

Make the decision to  
**STOP**  
your anger  
**EARLY**  
...before it  
becomes dangerous!

tightening of the stomach, contracting of muscles, sweating, shaking, and the desire to hit or yell. And don't forget that children take on the emotional energy of their parents. So if you are angry, it will be much harder for your child think clearly and decide what to do to act appropriately.

## Four Steps to Staying Calm (When You're Angry)

### Step 1 – Stop. Breathe. Count.

Recognize the signs of impending anger and say to yourself, "STOP! I'm getting angry."  
Don't try to deal with the situation when you feel the anger rising in you.  
Put space between yourself & your child (i.e.: put yourself in "time out" or your child in a safe space).  
Once there is space between you, *breathe*.  
Don't talk yourself into a frenzy and focus on how mad you are.  
Fill your lungs with air, then exhale with a sigh. (NOTE: *Anger makes us take short breaths.*)  
Take a few deep breaths to help the physical symptoms of anger dissipate and get control of yourself.  
Count slowly and purposefully to 10 or 20—or even to 100, if it's really bad.  
Counting gives you *time*—it gives you the mental distance you need to pause and regroup.

### Step 2 – "See" Yourself on Video

Pretend that you are watching yourself on a video that you can rewind and fast-forward.  
(*Do you see how you are about to wring your child's neck because she won't finish her dinner?*)  
Get a better grip by standing outside the situation and looking at it more objectively.  
Clarify your long-term goal of helping your child *grow* through this situation, instead of focusing on this short-term power struggle between you

### Step 3 – Adjust Your Expectations and Your Thinking

Stop blaming your kids for spoiling your idealized "pretty picture."  
Deal with life as it *is*, rather than dwelling on how you'd like it to be.  
Reduce your anger by reminding yourself that parenting is a *process*.  
(*Focus on the big picture, rather than agonizing over each daily issue.*)  
Know typical development—so you can remind yourself that this is NORMAL for all kids this age.  
Ask yourself: Will I remember this in three weeks—or three years from now?"



### Step 4 – Use Skill

At this point, analyze the situation.  
"What do I need to do?"  
Decide on a skill to bring things back in control.  
Choose from one of your parenting "bag of tricks." See ideas →  
Once you've decided, face your child with a different attitude.  
Convey, "I am the parent. I am in charge. This is the plan."

(*Kid Cooperation*, p.125-131)

#### PARENTING SKILLS

*Make rules & expectations clear*  
*Give a choice*  
*Grandma's Rule ("If...then...")*  
*Active Listening (affirm feelings)*  
*Make an I-Statement*  
*Try mutual problem-solving*  
*Time-out (to cool down)*  
*Natural consequences with empathy*  
*Logical consequences--without anger*  
*Distraction*  
*Ignoring*

### Make a plan for the future.

Create an action plan for the future with some of your ideas. Select one (or two) that you will try the next time your child is upset. If you are going to need any props, get them handy and keep them nearby. Here's an example of one parent's action plan shared by Elizabeth Crary:

#### Action Plan for Dealing with a Bedtime Problem

##### **When I change Ryan's bedtime routine, I will:**

- Tell him what the new rules for bedtime are.
- Deal with his anger by holding him firmly to prevent him from hurting me and rocking him to calm him.

- Deal with my intense feelings by standing still and taking deep breaths first, and then drowning out his noise by chanting over and over, *“Peace flows like a river.”*

**Before I put Ryan to bed the first night, I will:**

- Move the rocker into his room.
- Make sure he has a snack before I say it’s time for bed.
- Remind myself that I know what to do if I become angry.
- Plan something enjoyable to do with the extra quiet time I have after getting him to bed successfully.

**CONFIDENCE COMES WITH PLANNING.**

**You will feel more assurance as a parent when you plan ahead.** Planning takes a bit more thought and time upfront, but the payoffs are well worth it. Strategies help boost your confidence and keep you calm. Parents always feel more in charge when they are prepared with tools and skills.

My Action Plan	
The next time my child is upset, I will...	
·	Deal with the situation by...
·	Deal with my feelings by (instant calm)....
Before my child is upset, I will do the following things for...	
·	My Child....
·	Myself...

**The Keys to  
SUCCESSFUL PARENTING**

**Take Charge**

Expect your children to obey.  
No guilt. No excuses.

**Think**

Have a parenting plan.

**When You Say It, Mean It.**

More action, less talk.  
Think. Warn. Act. Follow through.

**Use Skill.**

What is the goal?  
What skill will help me achieve my goal?

**Avoid These Mistakes.**

Giving in.  
Having fuzzy expectations.  
Allowing bad manners.  
Being inconsistent.

*(Kid Cooperation, p. 31)*

Children, in turn, pick up their parents’ confidence and amazingly, they tend to act out less. Why? Because children always feel more secure when they know what to expect. They are comforted by a parent’s dependability, even if that means knowing that “every time I whine, my mother is going to ignore my request.”

Use the Action Plan to the left to create some strategies for your own challenging situation(s). Then post the “*Keys to Successful Parenting*” on your refrigerator. Read them every day for strength and empowerment. For years we have been teaching parenting skills workshops at Mandala. We still think these are the best guidelines for parenting with confidence and success for the long-haul. Good Luck!

**SOURCES:**

- Dealing with Disappointment* by Elizabeth Crary, Parenting Press, Inc. 2003.
- Kid Cooperation* by Elizabeth Pantley. New Harbinger Publications, Inc., 1996.
- Love and Limits* by Elizabeth Crary. Parenting Press, 1994.
- The No-Cry Discipline Solution* by Elizabeth Pantley, Better Beginnings, 2007.

## PREVENTIVE CALMING STRATEGIES

### Physical

- Get out into nature!
- Mark off time for yourself
- Walk, jog, or work out.
- Clean out a drawer or clean out a closet.
- Organize a room.
- Weed a garden or trim some bushes.
- Wash the car.
- Mow the lawn.
- Make repairs.
- Go for a bike ride.
- Meditate.
- Do yoga.

### Auditory/Verbal

- Talk to a friend.
- Reach out to compassionate others.
- Take a class.
- Join a parenting group.
- Listen to a book on tape.
- Perspectivize (look at a situation differently).
- Express emotions (tears, anger, frustration).
- Turn on music (soothing or rousing).
- Put on headphones and listen to yoga music.

### Visual

- Read a book.
- Put flowers in your home.
- Watch the sunset.
- Visualize your stress drifting away.
- Visit an art gallery.
- Surf the Internet.

### Creative

- Bake bread.
- Write in a journal.
- Sew or knit.
- Build something.
- Take photos.
- Draw or paint.
- Work a crossword puzzle.
- Work on a scrapbook.
- Do a physical puzzle (Rubik's cube).
- Play an instrument.

### Self-Nurturing

- Get a latte or cup of hot cocoa or tea.
- Take a long shower or bath.
- Sit back and sip a glass of wine.
- Eat a favorite dessert.
- Buy a new tool or gadget.
- Visit a book store.
- Sit in silence.
- Pray.

### Humor

- Watch a silly movie.
- Read a funny story.
- Go through a collection of cartoons.
- Listen to a comedy recording
- Visit an Internet humor site

Make a **CHANGE**  
in your life.  
Do something different!!

## QUICK CALMING STRATEGIES

### Physical

- Take a long deep breath and blow it out.
- Stand still, arms by your sides, and take 5 deep breaths.
- Sit down on the floor or ground (lower than your child) and take deep breaths.
- Go to the sink and get a drink of water.
- Shake your hands, as if to let the anger drip off.

### Auditory/Verbal

- Self-talk by saying: *"I am the adult. I can handle this respectfully."*  
Or say, *"This, too, shall pass."*
- Count backwards from 10 to 1. Say the alphabet backwards.
- Detach from the crisis and notice the background sounds—wind blowing or the hum of an appliance.
- Think about how you can make the situation into a humorous story.

### Visual/Mental

- Turn and look out a window or away from the chaos. Notice the color and texture of the clouds or walls.
- Visualize your child's anger dripping off you like water off a duck's back.
- Visualize your anger settling out like the sediment in a jar of muddy water.
- Imagine yourself as a trained safety professional—go mental in the face of high emotion, maintaining a calm attitude and quiet voice.
- Turn your thoughts inward and gently observe and accept your feelings without attempting to change them.
- Repeat a mantra over and over and visualize it until you feel calm.  
Ex: *Peace flows like a river* or *Anger in, anger out.*

*Move from blaming your child  
to taking responsibility for  
yourself and your reactions.*

Source:

*Dealing with Disappointment* by Elizabeth Crary, Parenting Press, Inc. 2003.

# Staying Calm

## When Your Child Is Upset

1. **Reminder: Why Stay Calm?**
  - Your child can't learn emotional regulation.
  - Your child feels too powerful.
  - You feel guilty afterwards.
  - It's ineffective.
2. **Identify Your Emotional Triggers**
  - Become self-aware.
  - Know where you are vulnerable.
  - Know your past and how it's affecting you.
3. **Remain Emotionally Separate**
  - Is this my problem--or my child's problem?
  - Think before saying, "I'm sorry."
  - Know if you are too involved.
4. **Remain In Charge of Your Feelings**
5. **Maintain Your Self-Esteem**
  - Brace yourself for "I hate you!"
  - Is your "loveableness" or "capableness" being threatened?
6. **Take Care of Yourself**
  - Talk to Someone
  - Check your facts
  - Revise your expectations
  - Get help.
  - Plan time for yourself.
  - Change your thinking: Use positive self-talk.
7. **Use Calming Techniques** (handout)
8. **Reduce Clutter**
  - Create order
  - Maintain order
9. **Develop an Action Plan**
  - Deal with the situation
  - Deal with the feelings. (Learn to "Just listen...")
  - Make a plan. (Think. Warn. Act. Follow through.)

### BECOME A CONSCIOUS PARENT.

In order to stay calm when your child becomes upset, you will need to become extremely self-aware.

That means being able to step back and reflect on yourself and your reactions.

It means understanding your past and present triggers.

