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Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids  
*How to Stop Yelling and Start Connecting*

Laura Markham, Ph.D.

Praise for

**Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids**

**Advance Press Review Excerpts**

**Other Parenting Experts' Review Excerpts**

Waiting for: Elizabeth Pantley, Patty Wipfler

"The Aha! moment in Dr. Laura Markham's Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids is that attachment isn't just for babies. Attachment provides the foundation for the growing child to learn emotional intelligence, empathy, and responsibility while he masters his environment. Dr. Laura teaches by example, holding parents with compassion as she gives them priceless, easy to use strategies to create a secure, healthy attachment with their child." - Lysa Parker & Barbara Nicholson, Founders of Attachment Parenting International and authors of Attached at the Heart: 8 Proven Parenting Principles for Raising Connected and Compassionate Children.

"Dr. Laura shows parents how their empathy can wire their child's brain for emotional regulation and happiness -- and a brighter future for humanity. Her understanding and knowledge of the many challenges of raising loving, compassionate children gives parents powerful tools to be the best that they can be. A simple, yet revolutionary, message of love." - Nancy Samalin, M.S, best selling parenting author whose most recent book is Loving Without Spoiling.

Peaceful Parents, Happy Kids has two important ideas, and one revolutionary idea. Dr. Laura Markham's guidance on fostering connection and coaching instead of controlling are the important ideas, and they can make a huge difference in your life as a parent. Her explanation of why parents need to regulate ourselves first—before we can help regulate our children—is the revolutionary idea. Read it and you'll see why she calls her work "Aha! Parenting." - Lawrence J. Cohen, PhD, author of Playful Parenting

"I have worked with over 100 different parenting educators as host of the Great Parenting Show. Dr. Laura Markham is wildly popular with our international community! She has such a warm, approachable style, based both on her own experiences as a parent, and as a psychologist. Her work is practical, easy-to-apply and transformative! Get a cup of coffee, find a comfy chair, and be prepared to get great advice from a wise, new friend and fellow parent!" - Jacqueline Green, Host of the Great Parenting Show

"A much needed resource for parents....encouragement and actionable, doable, advice for parents to strengthen their connection with their children, and take care of themselves. Clearly helps parents to see how what they are doing today impacts and influences what happens tomorrow, yet the tone is gentle and non-judgmental. Such a user friendly format for (often) weary parents." - Lisa Sunbury, Regarding Baby

“Parents, this is the book we've all been waiting for! Dr. Laura Markham’s compassion, wisdom, common sense, love and understanding radiates in each carefully chosen word, example and suggestion throughout this well-written, easy-to-read, delicious book on peaceful parenting. From her chapter on effectively managing anger, “Listen to your anger, rather than act on it” to my favorite quote, “Your child is acting like a child because he is one” you’ll know you’ve found your parenting bible! Thank you Dr. Markham.” - Rev. Susan Nason, Parent Educator and Consultant

### **Reviews from Parents and Mom Bloggers**

My entire family dynamic has positively changed and I attribute it mostly to Dr. Laura Markham and Aha! Parenting.com. I suspect you will not think it corny when I say you are changing the world. - Jennifer Andersen, OurMuddyBoots.com

I’ve searched high and low for parenting guidance that is sensible, simple, effective and adaptable. That does not heap guilt upon me. That strikes a chord so it’s easy to remember when I need it most. I have found it in Dr. Laura Markham. My relationship with my 4 year old has improved 1000 fold since trying your methods. The way you teach this simple message of love has made it revolutionary for me. – Daniela, mother of 4 year old and 2yr old girls.

I read Dr. Laura every day and I can actually feel my brain being rewired. I sense myself making continual progress towards the mother I want to be. I'm learning to love myself unconditionally along the way, too. – Mamammalia, Biologist and Mom-Blogger

Following your advice has meant our son rarely has tantrums anymore. Dr. Laura's advice really works and makes being a parent (and a child, I'd say) much better. I don't pretend I am perfect all the time, but she helps me to learn and do better by my son. – Beatrice, mother of two year old boy.

Once I started reading Dr. Laura, I learned how to change my viewpoint and melt my own hardened heart. This is not to say that I'm a perfect parent now or that my child always listens. But Dr. Laura has probably saved me from a nervous breakdown and has given me the gift of enjoying my daughter again. – Amanda, mother of a one year old and four year old.

I don't know if you really understand what you are doing for parents, children, families, and the world. The tools you share are worth more than money and cars and houses. You have enabled me to CHANGE myself, something I never thought I could do. Your writing taught me to really reflect on who I was first, which was key to my ability to reflect on myself as a parent. When I read your words I can feel how much you love and respect children... I can't explain how much I hated who I was, and to like myself now...it's just amazing; it makes me cry to think about it. THANK YOU from the bottom of my heart.- Kimberley Yvette Price, TheSingleCrunch.com

Dr. Laura takes philosophy and puts it into everyday, practical application. As a result, I have a child whose loving behavior is commented on almost daily by others. I am told I am 'lucky' with my daughter, but I believe her disposition is the result of following Dr. Laura's advice. I do not do Time Outs, I do not spank, in fact, I don't even raise my voice, let alone yell. The more I read Laura's material and implement it into my everyday language, the easier it becomes. I'm certainly not perfect, but Dr. Laura gives us permission to be imperfect and try again. My happy, content, 'well-behaved' toddler who has so much to do with what Dr. Laura teaches. I couldn't do without her and am grateful for her teachings every day. – Julie, mother of a two year old daughter.

If I thought for a minute that this connection-based parenting style was resulting in a bratty, selfish, entitled, walk-all-over-you kid, I would drop it like a hot potato and look for something else. Thankfully, I don't have to, because I find just the opposite. My daughter is almost 9, we have a great connection, she is thriving and a pleasure to be around. – Jennifer, mother of nine year old.

I had just read Dr. Laura's blog about staying calm and acknowledging his desires. When the screaming and stomping began, I stopped what I was doing and sat down next to him. I made eye contact, listened to his complaint and did not let the screaming anger me; I then calmly explained that I hear him. I know cheesy poofs are so tasty and I love them too but he will have to wait half an hour until dinnertime. He blubbered briefly, collapsed into my arms for a minute and then went to play with his toys. My husband congratulated me on keeping my cool. The best part? He was perfectly pleasant the rest of the evening. Wow! – Aimee, mother of three year old.

When I feel frustrated with my son, I think... what would Dr. Laura suggest that I do? One of the biggest lessons I've learned from you, Dr. Laura, is that I can always be my child's advocate, or at least an advocate for his feelings. As soon as I start operating like we are on the 'same team,' my son picks up on my attitude shift and often immediately softens his behaviors and is ready to compromise. You have taught me that I should never expect perfection from myself. This has truly liberated me to think of myself as a good parent... thereby leading me to make better and more loving parenting decisions! – Charlotte, mother of four year old.

I have been skeptical in the past of hugging a child who is screaming at you and being generally quite awful ... In theory I know it makes sense but I find it hard when they are being so hateful and you don't feel particularly loving! But I had a breakthrough. I wanted my son to put his coat on as it was freezing outside. His behavior was deteriorating. When he screamed at me, I just said – 'What's up love? I think you need a big mummy cuddle and you can tell me what's making you feel bad.' Then I hugged him and he burst into tears. We had a cuddle and he put his coat on happily! It was textbook 'Dr. Laura'! – Rachel, mother of three year old

Dr. Laura's advice really does work in the short term and in the long haul. For me, it always helps me to vision what type of adult do I want my daughter to be? Frankly, I have found I do not want to help create a sole compliant and obedient adult. I want to

help create a woman who is emotionally aware, able to regulate her emotions, empathize with other's emotions, remain connected to important people even through difficult emotions and learn that she can both make apologies and accept apologies. Dr. Laura, your parenting tips help me daily with these goals and I am so grateful to you. – Preeti

Dr. Laura...I tell everyone I know and even strangers about your peaceful form of parenting. I love this approach, the challenge of staying on top of your own emotions really getting at the root of the problem your child is having, slowing down to allow the connection to be full and true with your child, deep breaths, and lots of love. It is incredible the transformation that has occurred in my family. I feel so fortunate to have found your writings. The best part about it is that you don't have to be perfect. Instead of creating blow up moments in your day you are creating connections, loving times and sharing your real emotions with your children. These real moments teach our children how to be the best they can be, not perfect, just real. Thank you Dr. Laura Markham for bringing so much knowledge and love to parenting. – Carrie B., mom of two boys under age four.

It took a lot of faith that what Dr. Laura said would work, and so much of it went against conventional wisdom that I was afraid to be the laughing stock of my circle of friends. But having nothing else in my parenting bag to try, I went for it. Once I could slow my reactions down and see what I was doing, see how it affected my daughter, and realize my own personal pain that I was projecting onto her, it rapidly became easier. My daughter just turned three, and I tell you that now I am NOT AFRAID of tantrums anymore because they don't have the power to make me want to fight or run from my daughter, and I don't feel out of control even when I am tired, because I know what to do, how to love her the best I can, and that it works! - Martha, mother of three year old daughter.

Most of us were not raised that way. But wouldn't it have been great if we had been? Wouldn't it be great if our generation of parents chose to parent differently? Imagine the generation of kind, compassionate, empathetic people that could come from that! We have to do some work as we reflect on our own pasts, figure out what was missing for us, heal old wounds and then unlearn what has been laid down in our psyches. That work is not easy either. But it is healing. It can heal relationships with parents and siblings and help us to heal - and alter the course of - the relationships we have with our own children. – Amy, mother of five year old son

Yes, Yes, Yes, Dr. Laura's advice works! She hits at the heart of why children misbehave: because of fear and because of problems with relationships. It's harder but works so much better, and as a parent, I am not left with feelings of guilt and shame for being mean to my child. Our relationship has strengthened, and I can feel good that my interactions with her are loving and positive AND firm. Personally, I wish she would write a book so I could buy it for everyone I know! - Maria, mother of a four year old daughter.

For Daniel, Eli and Alice,  
Who taught me to love.

And for parents everywhere,  
Whose love is shaping the next generation, and transforming humanity:  
Our future rests on your shoulders.

*"One generation full of deeply loving parents would change the brain of the next generation, and with that, the world." - Charles Raison*

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## ***Foreword by Jack Canfield***

My next door neighbor David taught me a great lesson one morning as I watched him teach his seven-year-old son Kelly how to push the gas-powered lawn mower around the yard. As he was showing him how to turn the mower around at the end of the lawn, his wife Jan called to him to ask a question. When David turned to answer the question, Kelly pushed the lawn mower right through the flower bed at the edge of the lawn—leaving a two-foot wide path leveled to the ground!

As soon as David saw what had happened, he began to lose control. He had put a lot of time and effort into making those flower beds the envy of the neighborhood. The moment his voice climbed higher in a semi-rage toward poor Kelly, Jan quickly ran over to him, put her hand on his shoulder and said, "*David, please remember...we're raising children, not flowers!*"

I've devoted myself for more than forty years to inspiring and empowering hundreds of thousands of people who want to achieve their professional and personal goals. And for most people one of the most challenging of their goals is to raise a thoughtful, productive, and compassionate child – and to enjoy an authentic, intimate, joyful relationship with that child right through the teen and young adult years. And, as I'm sure you know, it is not an easy job.

Every day in my workshops I see adults struggling to heal and overcome the limiting effects of their childhood wounds. Did these people have bad parents? No. Like most of us, their parents were good people who were limited by their own upbringings, who often

forgot they were raising children, not flowers – or who simply never learned how to be good parents.

The parents I teach and coach often strain to break these cycles, to create a fresh start with their children, but, the best of intentions are not always enough to heal old scars.

We want to be inspired and peaceful parents, but the hopped-up culture and our stressful times makes it, well, just plain hard. We're sometimes so bogged down by our own emotions and pressures that the slightest mishap by one of our kids will send us over the edge. And we can recite, as we go over that edge, the litany of what we needed to do to be better parents: be more patient, be less stressed, stop yelling, be more encouraging and supportive. Yet all of us find achieving these goals much harder than it sounds.

The parents who succeed seem to have a secret. They're more peaceful, calmer, but they also stay more connected – to their kids, and to their own inner wisdom. They aren't just more patient – they seem more present and joyful with their children. This of course produces better-behaved kids – so there's less need to work at being patient through clenched teeth. When their kid accidentally mows down the flowers, they already remember that what's most important is how they're raising their children, not how beautiful or impressive their flower garden is.

Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids is a book that lets us inside this secret of successful parenting. Dip in to any one of the thorough, practical, inspirational chapters, and Dr. Laura Markham shows us how to replenish our spirits so we can give our kids the best of

ourselves, not what's left of ourselves. Chapters like "**Connection: *The Essential Ingredient for Happy Parents, Thriving Kids***" remind us of this profound but often neglected truth.

The parents I know don't have much time to read. The beauty of this book is that Dr. Laura includes Action Guides. Each of these nuggets of wisdom is short enough to read at one sitting, whether before bed, waiting in the car, or while you're trying to calm yourself down before re-engaging with your kid. Step-by-step blueprints like "5 Steps to Keep Your Cool When Your Kid Melts Down" and "Use Connection To Make Bedtime Easier" are simple enough to absorb and implement in the heat of battle.

The battle, of course, is never actually between a parent and child. That is just the after manifestation of a battle that is waged inside of the parent. Giving our children the best of ourselves requires that we do some inner work, resolving the conflicts, which is never an easy challenge. But what better motivation to engage in that work than our love for our children? Dr. Laura offers us parents a repertoire of strategies to heal our own wounds and deepen the inner connection with our own true selves and thereby make it easier to create our longed for deeper connection to our children. It really is true, as she reminds us, that "It's Never Too Late to Have a Happy Childhood."

Having Dr. Laura Markham on your bedside table is like having an angel on your shoulder, whispering useful secrets in your ear. These are the secrets every mother and

father needs to know to become a more peaceful and effective parent – and as a result, a happier person.

Jack Canfield

Co-author, *Chicken Soup for the Parent's Soul* and *Chicken Soup for the Mother's Soul*

## ***Introduction: Secrets of Peaceful Parents***

Parenting is hard. The pressures of everyday life leave many parents feeling guilty, plagued by a sense that we could do a better job if only we had a little more time, were a little less tired, or simply knew where to begin. Human beings weren't designed to handle the amount of stress our modern life loads on us, which makes it difficult to hear our natural parenting instincts. It's almost as if we're forced to parent in our spare time, after meeting the demands of work, commuting and household responsibilities. Even worse, our culture erodes our relationship with our children, and woos them away from us at too early an age.

But there are parents who raise wonderful children, without a lot of drama. They seem at peace with themselves as parents. Their children seem to be thriving. What are their secrets? What exactly makes their children grow into terrific teens and adults? What if you could find out what they do, and put it into practice with your own children?

You can. These parents have a secret. In fact, they have a whole secret life, inside their heads. They talk to their children differently. They talk to *themselves* differently. They're approaching the whole experience of parenting from a new perspective. You might say they've had some big Aha! moments that have shifted the way they raise their children. This shift changes the way we perceive and respond to our children on every level, but we can condense it to ***Three Big Ideas***. Big ideas, but simple and replicable—for every parent. Here they are.

### **[START BOX] 3 Big Ideas**

#### **1. Our First Responsibility As Parents Is Regulating Ourselves.**

Most parents think that if our child would just “behave” we could maintain our composure as parents. The truth is that managing our own emotions and actions is what allows us to feel peaceful as parents. Ultimately we can’t control our children, or the hand life deals them—but we can always control our own actions. Parenting isn’t about what our child does, but about how we respond. In fact, most of what we call parenting doesn’t take place between a parent and child, but within the parent. When a storm brews, a parent’s response will either calm it or incite a full-scale tsunami. Staying calm enough to respond constructively to all that childish behavior – and the stormy emotions behind it—requires that we grow too. If we can use those times when our buttons get pushed to reflect, not just react, we can notice when we lose equilibrium and steer ourselves back on track. This inner growth is the hardest work there is, but it’s what enables you to become a more peaceful parent, one day at a time.

The Aha! here is that an adult’s peaceful presence has a more powerful influence on a child than yelling ever could. Your own emotional regulation—a fancy way of saying your ability to stay calm—allows you to treat the people in your life, including the little people, calmly, respectfully, and responsibly. That’s what produces children who are emotionally regulated, respectful and responsible. **Part 1 of this book will give you the tools to manage your emotions, even on those days when child pushes all your buttons.**

## **2. What Children Most Need from Us Is to Stay Connected.**

Children thrive when they feel connected and understood. Parenting effectively depends above all on your connection to your child. Period. Otherwise we have little

influence ("My kid won't listen!") and parenting becomes an exhausting, thankless task. Children need to feel deeply connected to parents or they don't feel entirely safe, and their brains don't work well to regulate their emotions and follow parental guidance. So focusing first on connection produces children who are not only happier, but easier. Ready for the Aha! Moment? This loving connection that makes our hearts melt is what puts the joy back in child-raising. **In Part 2 of this book, you'll see how to strengthen and sweeten your connection with your child.**

### **3. Kids Need Coaching, Not Controlling.**

Small humans rebel against force and control, just like big humans do. Luckily, they're always open to our influence, as long as they respect us and feel connected to us. What raises great kids is coaching them—to handle their emotions, manage their behavior and develop mastery—rather than controlling for immediate compliance. Thoughtful parents know that what they do today either helps or hinders the person their child is becoming. They “emotion-coach” so that their child develops the emotional intelligence essential to managing feelings and making wise choices. They use empathic limits rather than punishment—even just “timeouts” and “consequences”—to coach their child's development of self-discipline, rather than simply forcing their child into obedience. They're guided by core values so they don't compromise on respectful relating or family time, but they also don't sweat the small stuff. That makes for more peaceful parents and happier children. The Aha! Moment here is that the coaching approach that works best in the long-term to raise happy, responsible adults is actually more effective than traditional parenting in producing self-disciplined, cooperative kids



in the medium term. **Part 3 of this book will show you why—and how you can raise that child.**

[END BOX]

### ***What's Different About This Book***

Most parenting books focus on changing the child's behavior. And yes, this book will help you support your child to become his or her very best self. But we'll be approaching this from the perspective of our *Three Big Ideas*—**Regulating Yourself, Staying Connected, and Coaching Instead of Controlling**. You'll find that each of these three Big Ideas is a constant thread throughout this book, as well as being the focus of Part 1, 2, or 3. Because you'll have to manage your own triggers and emotions to effectively coach and connect with your child, you'll find consistent reminders to **Regulate Yourself** so you can return to a state of equilibrium before intervening with your child. Because **Connection** is at the very heart of peaceful parenting, you'll find an emphasis throughout this book on staying fiercely connected to your child, whether you're trying to get her out of the house in the morning or keeping him from hitting his brother.

The third, and longest section, of this book—**Coaching Instead of Controlling**—does focus on your child. But instead of tips to control or manipulate his behavior with punishment and bribes, you'll find step by step blueprints on how to coach your child to support both his short and long-term development into a more confident, resilient, self-disciplined, emotionally intelligent person. We focus on your daily interactions with your child, which fall into three basic categories, each of which is explored in its own

chapter. Here's a preview.

- **Emotion Coaching.** Young children's brains are still growing, like their bodies, so their rational brain centers haven't yet learned to moderate their strong feelings. Whether we're aware of it or not, we give our child constant messages about feelings; implying either that they're dangerous, or simply part of being human. I'll be giving you hands-on tools to coach your child so that she can better manage her emotions, and thus her behavior.
- **Loving Guidance.** Children rely on us to guide them in this big and confusing world. Unfortunately, our own childhood experiences and cultural messages tell parents to guide with punishment, force, and control. Instead of threatening (1, 2, 3...), or manipulating, we'll get to the root of your child's behavior—the feelings underneath it. I'll help you address those feelings and nurture your child's emotional intelligence, so she can learn to manage her own emotions, and therefore her behavior, which is what creates self-discipline. If you're looking for a more positive approach to discipline—that helps kids *want* to behave—this chapter is for you.
- **Supporting Mastery.** Children are naturally curious, but too often we undermine their desire to learn. Building on the foundation of connection, emotion-coaching, and positive guidance provided in this book, the last chapter gives you tools to protect your child's natural curiosity and support his emerging passions while encouraging the confidence and resilience he needs to succeed in life.

As we consider each of these topics, we'll apply our *Three Big Ideas*—**Regulating Yourself, Staying Connected, and Coaching, Not Controlling**—to transform every

interaction with your child. In each chapter, I'll suggest specific, nuts-and-bolts ways to put these ideas into real-life practice as your child moves through each developmental stage. Reading through the developmental stages will crystallize for you why the way you soothe your infant and handle your toddler's tantrum helps develop her ability to tolerate frustration at four, get along with her sibling at six, or stand up to the mean girls at eight. In fact, while this book ends at age nine, you'll understand how to avoid raising a child who slams out of the house when she's twelve or experiments with drugs at fifteen. Each chapter finishes with "How To" **Action Guides** with concrete game plans that use self-regulation, connection and parenting for the long term. I hope you'll experiment, play, and adapt them to your family.

In each chapter, you'll also see how to use these same *Three Big Ideas*—**Regulating Yourself, Staying Connected, and Coaching, Not Controlling**—to help you find more peace, confidence and joy as a parent. It's hard work. But you'll be rewarded. As you yell less and connect more, your child will become more cooperative on a daily basis. But even more important, you'll see him thrive, growing into a happy, confident, self-disciplined person. The good news is that this is the easier way to parent. Yelling, threatening, and negotiating can ruin anyone's day. Peaceful parents find it much easier to be calm and patient. Why? Because this kind of parenting creates a better parent-child relationship, which produces better-behaved children—and parents who enjoy their child more. Peaceful parents have actually found a way to put the joy back into parenting.

## ***You Can Be a More Peaceful Parent***

*“Providing a loving, compassionate, scream-free, judgment-free household has not just been a gift to my children, but a gift I have given to myself. I have grown by leaps and bounds not just as a parent, but as a person as well. I am so grateful for Dr. Laura Markham who has been a shining light in my life.” - Jennifer, mom of four kids ages 15, 12, 9 and 6.*

This book has grown out of my work with thousands of parents through the Aha! Parenting web site and in private coaching. I’m trained as a clinical psychologist, specializing in child development and parenting. I spend my days thinking about what helps children thrive, and work with parents to help them raise happy, emotionally healthy, self-disciplined kids.

The more parents I meet, the more convinced I am that every parent is doing his or her best for their kids. But most parents haven’t been given the information they need—to help their child grow into a wonderful human being. In fact, parents hear a lot of counter-productive, even destructive advice that ends up making parenting a struggle:

*“How will she learn to self-soothe if you don’t let her cry?”*

*“Praise him and tell him what a good boy he is as often as you can!”*

*“Oh, she’s upset...quick, distract her!”*

*“The best way to stop a tantrum in the supermarket? Tell him you’re going home and just walk away. Believe me, he’ll follow!”*

*“She’s just manipulating you.”*

As I’ll explain, many of today’s common child-raising practices create unnecessary struggle and tension between parents and children. We’re told to control our child’s behavior, but how? Force only works while kids are small, and when we don’t

respond to the needs and emotions driving that behavior, the problems worsen.

Meanwhile, we're unwittingly sabotaging the healthy emotional development we all want for our children. Worse yet, this can erode our empathy for our child, because instead of following our instincts – which, naturally, tell us to respond to the needs of our little one – we harden our hearts. Over and over, I hear from parents who wish they had understood the ideas in this book when their child was born. Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids is designed to help you create an exceptional relationship with your child – and in the process, to raise a happy, self-disciplined, emotionally healthy human being.

### ***The Embrace of Great Love***

Whether you're looking for scientific research to guide your parenting decisions, wondering how to handle a specific challenge, or ready to tear your hair out, you've come to the right place. No one is completely peaceful all the time, or our work here would be done. Every time you make the choice to treat yourself and your child with more compassion, you take a step toward inner peace and more happiness.

As you make your way through this book, please remember to give yourself credit for every bit of progress in the right direction. All change comes one step at a time. Life is simply the slow accumulation of moments, and each moment gives us a new chance to change directions. Even if we change our reaction to only a few things that happen today, we'll find ourselves heading in a new direction. Before we know it, we're in a whole new landscape.

We all want to raise children with whom we stay close, children who adore us,

children who carry on our legacy of love when we're gone. We all want our grown children to flourish with the roots and wings we gave them, to look back on childhoods brimming with the love and laughter of parents who made them feel so good about themselves that anything seemed possible. That future relationship with your child is already taking shape.

There are no perfect parents, and no perfect children. But there are many families who live in the embrace of great love. This book is dedicated to you creating one of those families.

## Part 1: Regulating Yourself

*“One of the pieces you provided that seemed to have been missing before was that I needed to help myself, and give forgiveness and patience to myself, as much as I was trying to do with my daughter. And I needed to learn, really internalize, that her acting up was not a reflection on me or my parenting (at least in most cases!) but rather on how she was feeling and what her needs were at that moment.”- Alene, mother of two kids under four.*

### ***Peaceful Parents Raise Happy Kids***

There’s an old saying: Raising children is the toughest work there is. But why is it so difficult? When I ask an audience this question, parents usually propose two reasons. First, because the stakes are so high. And second, because there are no clear answers about how to do it right.

One answer is right, and one is not so right. The stakes are certainly high. But we actually do know a great deal about how to raise a happy, responsible, considerate, emotionally healthy, self-disciplined child. There is a great deal of valuable research on this most important topic, and parents will be delighted to learn how sensible it is. Over and over, studies show that parents who respond with warm, respectful attunement to the unique needs of their individual child, setting limits supportively and coaching their child’s emotions constructively, raise terrific kids. Sensible, but hard. As every parent knows, the hard part is managing our own emotional triggers so that we can make this a reality even some of the time.

Regardless of your child’s unique challenges, if you want to parent well, you have to work on yourself too. A child doesn’t cause the anger or anxiety that hooks us into power struggles; that comes from our own fear and doubt. Our own childhood

experiences, our own early traumas—major and minor—are part of who we are. What's more, they're the part of us that takes charge whenever we're upset; so when you're angry or frightened, you know that's almost always an early bad experience driving your reactions. Children have a way of triggering those unhappy feelings from our own childhoods, so the only way we can be peaceful parents is to mindfully prevent old feelings from causing new problems.

In fact, the things we most want for our children depend on our own inner work. We all want to raise children who are happy people, loved by others and lucky in love. If we can reflect on our own early childhood relationships and learn to nurture ourselves, we can offer our child—you can *offer your child*—the secure connection that will provide a foundation for loving relationships for the rest of her life. We can't control what happens to her. But we can make it likely that she'll surround herself with people who treat her well and help her find deep meaning in her life.

We also want to raise children who can manage their behavior, both because they're easier to live with and because that's our job as parents. We know how to raise those children, too. When we regulate our own emotions, our children learn to regulate their emotions. That allows them to regulate their behavior, presuming they're connected enough to us to want to.

Finally, we want our children to be successful. Not necessarily in the sense of earning the rewards offered by our society for achieving, but in the sense of discovering, honing and sharing their unique gifts throughout their lives. We know how to help children do that, too. Much of it has to do with managing our own anxieties, which leaves our child free to discover for himself and build confidence and resilience.



Some children are born with more difficult temperaments, and for those children our inner work as parents is even more important. But regardless of what your child brings into the world, the way you respond to her will shape her ability to make the most of her life. Your child will delight and exasperate you, thrill and annoy you. By accident, really, your child will ask you to grow, too. If you can notice when you're triggered and restore yourself to equilibrium before you take action, if you can soothe your own anxiety, if you can reflect on your own experience and make peace with it, you can raise happy, emotionally healthy children who are successful in every sense. You can become a peaceful parent, raising happy kids.

## **Your #1 Responsibility as a Parent**

*"Mindfulness: Allowing an emotion to take hold and pass without acting on it." -- Benedict Carey<sup>i</sup>*

*"Mindfulness: Not hitting someone in the mouth." -- 11 year old, quoted by Sharon Salzberg<sup>ii</sup>*

Your child is fairly certain to act like a child, which means someone who is still learning, has different priorities than you do, and can't always manage her feelings or actions. Her childish behavior is guaranteed, at times, to push your buttons. The problem is when we begin acting like a child, too. Someone has to act like a grown-up, if we want our child to learn how! If, instead, we can stay mindful—meaning we notice our

emotions and let them pass without acting on them—we model emotional regulation, and our children learn from watching us.

There's a reason the airlines tell us to put on our own oxygen masks first. Kids can't reach those masks or be relied on to use them properly. If we lose function, our kids can't save us, or themselves. So even if we would sacrifice ourselves to save our kids, it's our responsibility to put on our own masks first.

Kids can't manage their own rage by themselves, either. They can't find their way through the tangle of jealousy that pushes them to whack their little sister. They need our help to handle the fear that we don't love them because they somehow just aren't quite good enough. They know that if they were good enough, they wouldn't want to hit their sister, or sneak that piece of candy, or throw themselves down on the floor and scream. But they can't help themselves, however hard they try not to. (Sort of like when we eat that extra piece of cake.)

So just as with the oxygen mask, it's your job to help your child with his emotions, which is what helps him with his behavior. Unfortunately, when you're stressed out, exhausted, and running on empty, you can't be there constructively for your child, any more than if you black out on the plane.

*That's why your first responsibility in parenting is being mindful of your own inner state.* Mindfulness is the opposite of "losing" your temper. Don't get me wrong—mindfulness doesn't mean you don't feel anger. Being mindful means that you pay attention to what you're feeling, *but don't act on it*. Anger is part of all relationships. It's acting on it mindlessly, with words or actions, that compromises our parenting.

Emotions are useful, like indicator lights on a dashboard. If you saw a blinking red light in your car, you wouldn't cover it up or tear out the wiring that caused it, right? You would listen to the information and act on it, for instance, by taking your car in for an oil change. The challenge with human emotions is that so often we're confused about what to do when we feel them. We're hard-wired to respond to all "negative" emotion (those blinking red lights in your psyche that light up throughout your day) in one of three ways: fight, flight or freeze.

Those strategies work well in most emergencies. But parenting—despite our fears—is not usually an emergency. Usually, in parenting and in life, the best response to upsetting emotions is to reflect, not react. In other words, don't take action while you're triggered.

You can count on finding yourself hijacked by “fight or flight” hormones at times, but if you can train yourself to notice when you start to lose it, you have the choice to return yourself back to a state of equilibrium. That peaceful place inside insures that our actions are wise and loving.

But what happens when we just can't get there? When something our child is doing is driving us crazy, and all our efforts to calm down aren't working?

## **Breaking the Cycle: Healing Our Own Wounds**

*“In the absence of reflection, history often repeats itself...Research has clearly demonstrated that our children's attachment to us will be influenced by what happened to us when we were young if we do not come to process and understand those experiences.”*  
-- Dan Siegel<sup>iii</sup>

The famed psychologist D.W. Winnicott made many wise observations about parents and children. My favorite is that children don't need perfection from their parents. All we need to do is to avoid harming them, and to offer them the "ordinary devotion" which has always been required of parents.

Unfortunately, this is not as easy as it sounds. First, there is nothing ordinary about devotion. Devotion, as parents know, is walking the floor at 2am holding a screaming baby with an ear infection. Devotion is forcing yourself into the kitchen to make your kids dinner after a long day, when all you really want is to curl up on the couch and zone out. Devotion is taking off your jacket on a cold night to tuck it around a sleeping child in the back seat of the car. This ordinary devotion is the same intense love that has caused parents throughout human history to hurl themselves between their child and danger, from flying glass to enemy soldiers.

But even if we express our devotion in our willingness to put our children first, it is still not easy to be a "good enough" parent. Even a devoted mother or father often inadvertently hurts or scars a child. This includes parents who adore their children, who would be completely heroic and self sacrificing if the situation called for it. Why the gap between our intentions and our actions? The reason is that while we would never consciously hurt our child, so much of parenting, like every relationship, happens outside of our conscious awareness.

The truth is that virtually all of us were wounded as children, and if we don't heal those wounds, they prevent us from parenting our child as we truly want to. If there's an

area where you were scarred as a child, you can count on that area causing you grief as a parent—and wounding your child in turn.

We can all think of examples: the father who unwittingly repeats his father's judgmental parenting with his own son. The mother who can't set limits on her children's behavior because she can't bear their anger at her, and ends up raising self-centered, anxious kids. The parents who work overly long hours at their jobs because they doubt their own ability to be interested in (translate: to love) their infants. For all of us, the task is to consciously examine our own scars—some modest, some more painful—so that we don't inflict new ones on our children.

The wonderful news is that being parents gives us a map for where those scars are, and a chance to dig deep and heal ourselves. Our children have an uncanny ability to show us our wounded places, to draw out our fears and angers. Better than the best zen master or therapist, our children give us the perfect opportunity to grow and heal. Most parents say that loving their children has transformed them: made them more patient, more compassionate, more selfless. We'll always experience heightened sensitivity around the issues that shaped our early psyches, but as we heal the lingering hurts, our behavior is no longer driven by them, and we find that these scars inform us, motivate us, make us better parents.

So, how can you heal your own childhood issues, and become the parent you want for your children?

- **Parent consciously.** If we pay attention, we'll notice when our child pushes our buttons. Not that kids don't act like kids—they always do. That's age appropriate. But what bothers some parents would be greeted by others with a calm, warm, humorous attitude that helps kids WANT to behave. Whenever we get "triggered," we've stumbled upon something that needs healing. Seriously. Any time your child pushes your buttons, he's showing you an unresolved issue from your own childhood.
- **Break the cycle. Use your Inner Pause Button.** You don't have to repeat history with your kids. Even if you're already well down the wrong path, STOP. Take a deep breath, and hit the pause button. Remind yourself of what is about to happen unless you choose another course. Close your mouth, even in mid-sentence. Don't be embarrassed; you're modeling good anger management. Save your embarrassment for when you have a tantrum.
- **Understand how emotions work.** Anger is a message that something isn't working in our lives. The problem is that it's also a biological state that doesn't help us find the best solutions. When we're in the grip of the chemical reactions that make us "angry," we do and say things we would never choose to do otherwise. When your body and emotions are in "fight or flight" mode, your child always looks like the enemy. Take a breath and wait until you calm down before you make any decisions or take any actions.
- **Hit the Reset Button on Your Own "Story."** If you had a painful childhood, you can't change that. But what you can change is what you're taking with you from that childhood: your "story." You do that by reflecting on it, feeling the

painful feelings, but also considering new angles. If your father abandoned the family and you concluded that you weren't good enough, it's time to set the record straight and understand, from your adult vantage point, that you were more than enough and that his leaving had nothing to do with you. If your mother hit you and you concluded that you were a bad kid, a more accurate understanding would be that your mother was frightened and would have hit even the most angelic child in the world. You were just like any child: reaching out for love and attention in the only ways you knew. Coming to terms with your story and rewriting it can be a painful process, but it's liberating. It's also the only path to being the peaceful parent you want to be to your child.

- **De-Stress.** We all have a harder time being the parent we want to be when we're stressed out. Develop a repertoire of habits that help you de-stress: regular exercise, yoga, a hot bath, meditation. Can't find the time? Involve the whole family. Put on music and dance together, go for a walk, put everyone to bed with books early on Friday night for a quiet, relaxing evening and catching up on your sleep.
- **Get support in working through old issues.** Every parent needs support and a chance to talk about the hard work she's doing. Sometimes we can do that informally with friends or relatives. Sometimes a more formal "listening partnership" with another parent, as advocated by Patty Wipfler of Hand in Hand Parenting, can be a life-saver. You might want to be part of a parenting support group or community. If you feel stuck, find a counselor to help you move forward more happily in your life. There's no shame in asking for help; the shame would

be in reneging on your responsibility as a parent by damaging your child physically or psychologically. If you think you need help, please don't wait.

Reach out now.

No parent is perfect, because humans are by definition imperfect. No matter how much we work on ourselves, we will not always impact our children positively. But every time we pay attention, hit the Inner Pause button, and manage our stress, we're becoming more peaceful. And *that* gives any child a greater shot at happiness.

Winnicott was right. Our children don't need perfection from us. What they need is a parent who embraces growth, makes amends, and opens her heart when it wants to harden.

## **How to Manage Your Own Anger**

*"This approach is so powerful and has been life changing for me. The best part about it is that you don't have to be perfect. You have to be real, honest and able to say you were wrong. Instead of creating blow up moments in your day you are creating connections, loving times and sharing your real emotions with your children. These real moments teach our children how to be the best they can be, not perfect, just real." – Carrie, mother of two boys under age four.*

As long as you're human, you'll still sometimes find yourself in "fight or flight" mode, and your child will start to look like the enemy. When we're swept with anger, we're physically ready to fight. Hormones and neurotransmitters are flooding our bodies. They cause your muscles to tense, your pulse to race, your breathing to quicken. It's impossible to stay calm at those points, but we all know that clobbering our kids—while it might bring instant relief—isn't really what we want to do.



So commit now to No hitting, No swearing, No calling your child names, and No Threats. What about screaming? Never at your children, that's a tantrum. If you really need to scream, go into your car with the windows rolled up and scream where no one can hear, and don't use words, because those make you angrier.

Your children get angry too, so it's a double gift to them when you commit to constructive anger management. You not only don't hurt them, you offer them a role model. Your children will certainly see you angry from time to time, and how you handle those situations will teach them a lot. Will you teach them that might makes right? That parents have tantrums too? Or that anger is part of being human, and that learning to manage anger responsibly is part of growing up? Here's how.

- **Take Five.** Recognize that an angry state is not the best place from which to intervene in any situation. Instead, give yourself a timeout and come back when you're able to be calm. If your child is old enough to be left for a moment, you can go into the bathroom, splash water on your face, and do some breathing. Just say, as calmly as you can, *"I am too mad right now to talk about this. I am going to take a timeout and calm down."* Exiting does not let your child win. It impresses upon him just how serious the infraction is, and it models self-control. If your child is young enough to feel abandoned when you leave, just use the kitchen sink instead. Then, sit on the couch for a few minutes. Whether you're in your child's vicinity or behind a closed door, use this time to calm yourself, not to work yourself into a further frenzy about how right you are. Breathe deeply and silently say a little mantra that restores your calm. Your child will be watching.

Don't worry that you need to teach her a lesson about what she did wrong. She's getting one of the most important lessons she'll ever learn: how to responsibly regulate big emotions.

**Help your body discharge anger.** When you feel this angry, you need a way to calm down. Stop, breathe, remind yourself it isn't an emergency. Shake the tension out of your hands. Take ten more deep breaths. If you need to make a noise, hum. You might try to find a way to laugh, which discharges the tension and shifts the mood. Even forcing yourself to smile sends a message to your nervous system that there's no emergency, and begins calming you down. Tap the acupressure point on the side of either hand (where you would karate chop) while breathe and express your intention to calm down. If you feel you need to physically discharge your rage, put on some music and dance. You might follow the timeworn advice to clobber a pillow, but it's best if you can do that kind of discharging in private, because watching you clobber that pillow can be pretty scary for your child.

- **Change your thoughts so you can change your feelings.** If you're thinking your child is a spoiled brat who will grow up to be a thug, you can't calm down. The truth is, your child is a very young person who is in pain and is showing you that by his behavior. Remind yourself *"He's acting like a child because he IS a child....My child needs my love most when he least 'deserves' it...He's asking for my help with his legitimate needs and feelings."*

- **Listen to your anger, rather than acting on it.** Anger, like other feelings, is as much a given as our arms and legs. What we're responsible for is what we choose to do with it. Anger often has a valuable lesson for us, but acting while we're angry, except in rare situations requiring self-defense, is hardly ever constructive, because we make choices we would never make from a rational state. The constructive way to handle anger is to limit our expression of it, and when we calm down, to use it diagnostically: what is so wrong in our life that we feel furious, and what do we need to do to change the situation? Sometimes the answer is clearly related to our parenting: we need to change our approach before things get out of hand, or start putting the children to bed half an hour earlier, or do some repair work on our relationship with our nine year old so that she stops treating us rudely. Sometimes we're surprised to find that our anger is actually at our spouse who is not acting as a full partner in parenting, or even at our boss. Sometimes anger is a reminder that we need more sleep or a chance to vent regularly to a friend who will accept the full range of our feelings. And sometimes the answer is that we're carrying around anger we don't understand that spills out onto our kids, and we need to seek help through therapy or a parents' support group.
- **Remember that "expressing" your anger to another person can reinforce and escalate it.** Despite the popular idea that we need to "express" our anger so that it doesn't eat away at us, research shows that expressing anger while we are angry actually makes us more angry. This in turn makes the other person hurt, afraid, or angry, and causes a rift in the relationship. Rehashing the situation in our mind

always proves to us that we're right and the other person is wrong, which again makes us more angry as we stew. What works is to calm down, and then find a constructive way to address whatever is making us angry so that the situation is resolved, and our anger stops being triggered.

- **WAIT before disciplining.** Nothing says you have to issue edicts on the fly. They will never be what's best for your child's long-term development, or even what's best to prevent a repeat of the problem. Say as little as possible until you calm down, just something like: *"I need to calm down before I can talk about this."* If you take a ten minute timeout and still don't feel calm enough to relate constructively, you can say *"I want to think about what happened, and we'll talk about it later."*
- **Avoid physical force, no matter what.** Spanking may make you feel better temporarily because it discharges your rage, but it is bad for your child, and ultimately sabotages the positive things you do as a parent. Spanking, and even slapping, has a way of escalating, into harmful and sometimes even deadly violence. Do whatever you need to do to control yourself, including leaving the room. If you can't control yourself and end up resorting to physical force, apologize to your child, tell him hitting is never ok, and get yourself some help.
- **Avoid threats.** Threats made while you're angry will always be unreasonable. Since threats are only effective if you're willing to follow through on them, they undermine your authority and make it less likely that your child will follow the rules next time.

- **Monitor your tone and word choice.** Research shows that the more calmly we speak, the more calm we feel, and the more calmly others respond to us. Similarly, use of swear words or other highly charged words makes us and our listener more upset, and the situation escalates. We have the power to calm or upset ourselves and the person we are speaking with by our own tone of voice and choice of words. (Remember, you're the role model.)
- **Consider that you're part of the problem.** If you're open to emotional growth, your child will always show you where you need to work on yourself. If you're not, you'll find yourself caught in the same vortex with your child over and over. Your child may be acting in ways that aggravate you, but you are not a helpless victim. Take responsibility to manage your own emotions first. Your child may not become a little angel overnight, but his acting out will diminish dramatically once you learn to stay calm.
- **Still angry? Look for the underlying feelings.** Don't get attached to your anger. Once you've listened to it and made appropriate changes, let go of it. If that isn't working, remember that anger is always a defense. It shields us from feeling vulnerable. To dissolve anger, look at the hurt or fear under it. If your daughter's tantrums scare you, or you're upset at your son for hitting his little sister because you were once the little sister who got hit, reflect on those feelings and heal them. Once you're willing to feel the underlying feelings, you don't need the defense of anger, and it will dissipate.
- **Choose your battles.** Every negative interaction with your child uses up valuable relationship capital. Focus on what matters, such as the way your child treats

other humans. In the larger scheme of things, her jacket on the floor may drive you crazy, but it probably isn't worth putting your relationship bank account in the red over.

- **If you frequently struggle with your anger, seek counseling.** Don't be embarrassed to ask for help. You're taking responsibility as a parent to avoid hurting your child physically or psychologically.

## **How to Stop Yelling at Your Child**

*"I love all your advice. But I find it only works when I can stay calm, which is really hard. I'm a yeller. My mother was a yeller. I come from a long line of yellers. How do I break that cycle?" – Cynthia, mother of three kids under age six.*

Most parents yell. We don't even notice ourselves doing it half the time. Our voice just gets louder and louder. Or we do know we're doing it, but at that moment, it seems completely justified. After all, did you SEE what that kid DID?!

But we all know that our kids respond better if we don't yell. Yelling escalates a difficult situation, turning it from a squall into a storm. And really, how can you expect your child to learn to control his own emotions if you don't control yours?

If, instead, we can stay calm, it settles everyone else down. We model emotional regulation. We're able to intervene more effectively to solve the problem. Our child learns how to move herself from upset to calm. Our relationship with our child strengthens. He cooperates more. She starts to control her own emotions more.

And if we're honest, we know it's our own stuff that's making us yell. Some parents (Truly!) would look at the same behavior and be able to stay empathic, or joke about it. Because no matter how bad your child's behavior, it's a cry for help. Sometimes the behavior requires a firm limit, but it never requires us to be mean. And you can't help your child while you're shouting.

It isn't easy to stop yelling. You can desperately want to, and still find yourself screaming. If you were yelled at, it takes tremendous work not to yell. But if you know that you want to stop yelling, I assure you that it's completely possible—no matter how ingrained it is. It's not rocket science. It takes about three months. Like learning the piano, you start playing scales today, you practice daily, and soon you can pick out simple tunes. In a year you can play a sonata. I've seen hundreds of parents do it.

Will it be hard to stop yelling? Yes. It doesn't happen as if by magic. It takes constant, daily effort. No one can do it for you. Not yelling may seem like a miracle, but this is something you can do. If you keep working at it, some day you'll suddenly realize that you can't remember the last time you yelled. Want to get started?

- **Commit yourself.** Research shows that when we consciously, verbally "commit" ourselves to a course of action we're likely to achieve it, especially if we work at it daily. By contrast, simply "wishing" something would be different, or even "regretting" things we've done, doesn't usually change a thing. So write down your intention ("I speak respectfully to my child") and post it in a place where you'll see it frequently. Picture how lovely it will be in your home when you don't yell. Imagine yourself responding calmly—maybe even empathically, or

with a sense of humor!—to the things you yell about today. Keep revisiting that image. You're programming your subconscious.

- **Make the commitment to your family.** There is a catch, though. You have to commit yourself to someone else. Specifically, you have to commit to your child that you intend to stop yelling, because your child is really the only person who will be there to keep you honest. A bit scary? Yes. But you're role modeling, and if you want a child who doesn't yell at you, this is the way to get there. So explain to your kids that you've decided to stop yelling. Make a "Respectful Voice" sticker chart to reward yourself. At the end of every day, your child (!) decides whether you merit a sticker. Scary? Yes. But this is what keeps you accountable.

(Are you against sticker charts? So am I, for kids, because they teach the wrong lessons, which we'll talk about in the discipline chapter. But since parents have all the power in the family, this is a way to empower the child to hold the parent accountable. I'm not worried about teaching the parent the wrong lesson. Just don't give in to the temptation to impose a sticker chart on your child for respectful voice at the same time. He's got less self-control than you do while he's angry, and he'll learn best from your modeling.)

- **Stop, Drop, and Breathe** every time you notice yourself raising your voice, or about to raise your voice. How?
- **Stop talking** as soon as you notice yourself losing your temper. Close your mouth. Can't stop making noise? Hum, if you must. But close your mouth.



- **Drop it.** Really. Let it go for the moment. It's not an emergency. (If it is, get everyone out of danger and then come back to this process.) Just STEP AWAY FROM THE SITUATION.
- **Breathe deeply ten times.** Shake out your hands. This shifts you out of your “reptile brain” – the fight, flight or freeze response—and into conscious presence. Now you have a choice about how to act.
- **Remind yourself: you're the grown-up** and your child is learning from everything you do, right now. Look at your child and say *"I'm working hard to stay calm. I don't want to yell. Let me calm down, and then we'll try a do-over, ok?"*
- **Do whatever works for you to calm your body's fight or flight response--** more deep breathing, say a mantra, splash cold water on your face, look at your Respectful Voice sticker chart, remind yourself that your child is acting like a child because he IS a child. Remind yourself that there's no emergency.
- **Try a Do-Over.** When you're out of fight or flight, you'll know because your child will no longer look like the enemy, but like your own beloved baby, the one you've promised to cherish, love, and guide positively so she grows into a loving, wonderful person. **Now, start the interaction over.**

Hard, right? VERY hard, when you're swept with neurochemicals that tell you to attack. But simple. You simply delay the interaction until you're calm.

- **Wondering how your child will learn if you don't raise your voice?** When kids are scared, they go into fight or flight. The learning centers of the brain shut

down. Your child CAN'T learn when you yell. It's always more effective to intervene calmly and compassionately. Besides, when you yell, you lose credibility with your child. Kids become less open to your influence.

- **Wondering if maybe you're letting your kid off too easy?** He's hurting, and his "misbehavior" is an SOS that he needs your help. He's acting out because he has big feelings he can't yet understand and articulate verbally. Of course you set limits and redirect behavior. But your guidance NEVER needs to be mean or scary. You want your child to follow your guidance because he loves you and would never want to disappoint you, not because you scare him.
- **Wondering if you're being inauthentic?** Your child saw that you were very upset. She also saw that you were responsible about managing your own emotions. Being authentic about the truth of your experience never requires you to "dump" them on someone else, unfiltered. As the Dalai Lama says, *"Be kind whenever possible. It is always possible."* Besides, they're YOUR feelings, and only part of the emotion is coming from this current interaction with your child. Most of it comes from your own past, and the way you're seeing this situation.
- **And what if you find yourself yelling, despite your best efforts?** You will, in the beginning—more than once. But it isn't a mistake if you learn from it. Use each time you miss the mark as an opportunity to change something—about your routine, or your attitude, or your self-care—so you can do better next time.  
  
Support yourself so you can change.

Notice you can still guide your child—just respectfully. If you do this every time you find yourself yelling, or about to yell, you'll soon develop enough mindfulness to stop

yourself before you begin yelling. Next, we'll talk about ways to support yourself so you can actually do this in the moment.

[START BOX]

### ***A 3 Minute Process to Shift Yourself from Upset to Peace***

*"Dr. Laura... You say that the way to avoid yelling is to wait until I'm calm and then try a Do-over with my son. But when I get mad, I don't calm down so quickly. It could take an hour of trying to distract myself. Meanwhile, my son still did something wrong and I need to set him straight." – Jen*

The "Stop, Drop & Breathe" process assumes that you can calm yourself quickly enough to try a "do-over" of whatever pushed your buttons. But when your body goes into fight or flight, you're pumped full of neurochemicals telling you to attack. Your child looks like the enemy, and you feel an urgent need to "set him straight."

But it doesn't take the body an hour to calm down, unless you encountered a tiger. Seriously. Whatever your child did, it really was not an emergency. If it's taking more than a few minutes to calm down, it's because you haven't told your body it was a false alarm. Your body is still in fight or flight. And your mind is still on the warpath, so it takes an hour to "distract" it.

Whatever your child has just done, you will react more constructively from a place of calm. Here's a 3 minute Aha! moment to shift you into a new way of looking at things and calm your fight or flight reaction.

***Minute One: What's the thought that's upsetting you?***

- Say it silently to yourself. It might be something like *"He's disrespecting my authority....I have to nip this in the bud"* or *"He's just manipulating me!"*
- Consider that this thought that's driving your upset almost certainly comes from fear. That means it isn't as true as the interpretation of the situation that comes from love.

***Minute Two: Realize there is always another side to every story.***

- Consider that your parents no doubt had this thought about you once or twice, and you came out ok. Your child will, too.
- Consider the situation from your child's perspective. For instance, *"He's showing me how upset he is...he's allowed to have his feelings."*
- Consider how your upsetting thought makes you treat your child. If you let go of that thought, how would you respond to your child?

***Minute Three: Help your body release the feelings.***

- Tap the acupuncture point on the edge of your hand (the karate chop point) while you breathe deeply.
- Say to yourself while tapping: *"Although I'm upset, I'm safe. I can calm myself and heal this situation."*
- If you find yourself yawning, that's great—your body is releasing. The more you practice this, the more quickly your body will calm.

Now, return to your child, and start over from a place of love. Sound hard? It is, because when we're angry we're swamped with attack hormones. But when we open our

perspective a bit, we get to the root of the thoughts that trigger the yelling, and we change them. Every thought comes from fear, or from love. Choose love. [END BOX]

## **When Your Child Melts Down: How to Keep Your Cool**

*“I’m struggling with my inability to stay present and show empathy to my young children when they are having meltdowns... something in me shifts and all my good intentions fly out the window and I just want to get away from them. I’m not sure how to change this behavior because it seems so deep-rooted in me.”*

Children get upset often, because of their inexperience and cognitive immaturity. It’s our ability to stay calm when they’re upset that helps them develop the neural pathways to calm themselves. But most of us find it tough to stay empathic when our child starts to lose it. Something in us wants to scream “No!”

- *No, I don’t have time for this right now!*
- *No, you’re embarrassing me; people are looking!*
- *No, what am I doing wrong that she’s tantrumming again?*
- *No, why is she doing this to me?!*
- *No, why can’t you just suck it up the way I do?*

Bingo. Most of us learned as children that our feelings were unacceptable, even dangerous. So when our child has a meltdown, the little one inside of us gets triggered. Danger signs flash. As always when danger looms, we feel a sense of panic. We just want to get away (that’s flight) or we feel a sudden rage — we want to MAKE him shut up (that’s fight) or we go numb (that’s freeze).

Holding him with empathy, allowing him to let all those feelings out? Accepting his even when it's directed at us, without taking it personally? That's a stretch for most parents. All of our good intentions fly out the window.

And yet every child has numerous experiences of fear, anger, frustration and sadness. They need to express those experiences and have us listen. Over time, this teaches them to manage their emotions. In fact, we're the role model. Our child learns how to regulate her emotions and behavior from watching us regulate OUR emotions and behavior.

So what can we do to address our own deep-rooted feelings, so we can be there for our kids?

- **Acknowledge your own feelings.** Our panic in the face of our child's raw emotions is an issue from our own childhoods. The only way to uproot it is to see how it served us when we were little. Say to your rising panic: *"Thanks for keeping me safe when I was little. I'm grown now. These feelings are ok."*
- **Remind yourself that it isn't an emergency:** *"It's natural that I feel this way when my child is upset. But whatever happens, I can handle it."* This isn't a threat; it's your beloved child, who needs your loving help right now. If your mind persists in setting off alarms, tell it you'll deal with those concerns later, not now.
- **Remind yourself that expressing feelings is a good thing.** Your child will feel these feelings, no matter what. The only question is whether you make it ok for him to express them, or whether you teach him they're dangerous. Once he feels his emotions, they'll evaporate. (If you're wondering, it's the emotions he

represses that pop out without warning and make him act out.) Even if you can't say a whole-hearted *YES!* when your child starts to melt down, try to move from your automatic *NO!* to a warm-hearted *OK*, just the way you do at other times when your child needs you.

- **Take the pressure off.** You don't have to fix your child or the situation. All you have to do is stay present. Your child doesn't even need the red cup, or whatever he's crying for, he needs your loving acceptance of him, complete with all his tangled up feelings. His disappointment, rage, grief? They're all ok, and they will all pass without you doing a thing.
- **Take a deep breath and choose love.** Every choice we make, at core, is a move toward either love or fear. Let your caring for your child give you the courage to choose love. Not just love for your child, but love for the child you once were, and the parent you are now. Just keep breathing, and saying to yourself "*I choose love.*" Too corny? Research shows this works. But you can easily find another effective mantra: "*This too shall pass....I came out ok and she will too...I can handle this....*" Whatever works for you.
- **Tolerate the emotion without taking action.** You can act later, if you want. Or even in a few minutes, once you calm down. For now, let yourself feel it. Breathe your way through it. Name the emotion if that helps. Ok, anger. But what's under the anger? Hurt? Fear? Disappointment? Notice how it feels in your body.
- **Keep it simple.** Your child needs you to witness her outpouring of emotion and let her know that she is still lovable, despite all these yucky feelings. Explanations, negotiations, remorse, recriminations, advice, analysis of why she's

so upset, or attempts to “comfort” her (*“There, there, you don’t have to cry, that’s enough”*) will all shut down this natural emotive process. (Of course, you want to “teach” — but that needs to wait. Your child can’t learn until she’s calm.) You don’t have to say much. Your calm, loving tone is what matters. Maybe:

*You are safe. I am right here.*

*I hear you. Everybody needs to cry sometimes.*

*You’re telling me to go away, so I will move back a little bit, but I won’t leave you alone with these scary feelings.*

*When you’re ready, I’m right here to hug you.*

- **Find a way to process your own feelings.** Nothing triggers primal emotions like parenting. You also need to vent, which means feeling those emotions and breathing your way through them without taking action. Some of us can do this by journaling, or simply crying, but you may need to find someone to simply listen to you. Someone who will resist giving you advice. Someone who won’t be shocked when you admit that you wanted to slam your kid against the wall or leave him there in the grocery store, because they know everyone has felt this way, and you wouldn’t actually do it. Someone who won’t get triggered and go into a panic about whether it’s ok for you, or your child, to feel such things. Someone who will let you cry, who will be there for you just as you’re there for your child.

This is hard work for parents, but a great gift to our children. The good news is that once we say YES to children’s full range of feelings, they learn to manage them in



healthy ways. In fact, you'll see positive results immediately after every "tantrum" that you meet with love, because your child will feel so much better after emptying that full backpack of feelings. That's unconditional love in action.

## **You CAN Nurture Yourself While Raising Your Child**

*"The turning point for me was when Dr. Markham talked about parenting with your own cup full. If we enter the day empty, we have nothing to give to our children. Finding ways to refresh my energy is vital so I get up at 6am every morning and go for a walk by myself. It helps me energize and focus so I'm ready to meet the day and the needs of my children. Having playdates with friends is also vital so I've joined some groups in my church to ensure we all get the "friend time" we need." – Amanda, mother of a four year old and a one year old.*

The #1 resolution of parents everywhere? Be more patient. But having to summon up your patience is a signal that your cup is already dangerously empty. As Nancy Samalin, author of Love and Anger says, "You can't act much nicer than you feel." Willpower only takes us so far. The real job is keeping your cup full so you have plenty of joy and presence to share with your child. Kids love our joyful presence and become happier and more cooperative.

If you're finding yourself frequently resentful, depleted or exhausted, if your mind chatter often includes negative thoughts about your child, or if you're yelling at your child on a regular basis, you may be suffering from what I call SAP Disorder -- Sacrificing yourself on the Altar of Parenthood. That's when we forget to give ourselves the attention we need. It isn't good for us to feel deprived. It kills our natural joy. And it isn't good for our kids, who end up with a resentful, negative, impatient parent. (Guess whether that makes them behave better.)

Ultimately, you're the one responsible for how you spend the short life you've been given. On your deathbed, there won't be anyone else to blame if you've been unhappy. The secret work of adulthood is that we are all still growing up, and parenting forces us to learn to parent ourselves as well as our child. If you're old enough to have a child yourself, your parents are off the hook. It's your responsibility now. You deserve all the tenderness you would shower on a newborn baby. Giving that love to ourselves transforms our parenting—and our lives.

Does that mean you should tell your kid he can forget about getting his needs met, that it's about time your needs came first? No, of course not. Parenting is about nurturing our child, which means noticing what she needs and trying to make sure she gets it. You are, after all, the grown-up. But we can only be peaceful parents to the degree that we "parent" ourselves.

It's partly a matter of changing what you do; nurturing yourself in small ways throughout your day. And it's partly a matter of changing your attitude; finding peace inside yourself. The solution is to tend to ourselves as well as we can each moment of the day, just as we do our child. To honor both our needs and theirs. The bad news is, this takes work. But that work—the internal work of embracing ourselves with compassion—is what transforms us. Here's how.

- **Make it a habit to tune into yourself as often as possible throughout your day.** Just take a deep breath and let it flood your body with well-being. Breathe in calm, breathe out stress. Simply being present with yourself is an essential form of "attention" that we all need.

- **Every time you notice you're getting resentful or irritable, stop.** Ask yourself *"What do I need right now to stay in balance?"* Then, give it to yourself -- whether your child is there or not. *(Five minutes to sit on the back steps and listen to the birds? A glass of water? Five minutes of dancing to great music?)* If you can't do it right now, make a date with yourself for later. *(A bath after the kids go to bed. A glass of wine with your spouse. More sleep tonight.)*
- **Notice the challenging times of day and find ways to nurture yourself through them.** It's your life, and you're in charge, whether it feels that way or not. Letting yourself feel victimized doesn't help your kids. Does bedtime drive you crazy? Make a plan to make it better, whether that's sharing more responsibility with your spouse, starting earlier, posting a schedule, getting more sleep yourself, or enjoying a cup of tea while you read to your child.
- **Soak in the beauty and joy of every moment you can.** Stop rushing and revel in your child's laughter, the sweet smell of his hair, her joy in mastering something new. "Smelling the roses" replenishes your spirit. It makes life worth living. The fullness of your presence is what inspires your children to connect and cooperate. And it cures SAP disorder.

[START BOX] ***When You're Feeling Overwhelmed***

- ***Focus on what matters.*** Are your kids fed? Have you hugged them and told them how much you adore them? Kids sense when we're stressed and disconnected, and act out, so often a hug reels them back to their best selves, too.

- ***Find support.*** Parenting is the toughest work humans do. We all need more support. As essayist Anne Lamott says, “Take yourself through the day as you would your favorite mental patient relative: with great humor and lots of small treats.” I don't mean more cookies. How about a sweet kiss from your spouse (even if the marriage doesn't feel perfect right now). A hug from your child (even if he's not perfect, either!) Finding someone you can vent to about how hard it is (who won't try to fix you or your child).
- ***Support Yourself.*** Talk to yourself like someone you love. Post uplifting messages around the house to boost your mood. Leave the dishes in the sink for a long soak in the tub. Give yourself permission to really notice the sunset. Before you sleep, find three things to appreciate about yourself. Get enough sleep.
- ***When you lose it, use it.*** Ok, you blew it. So use this opportunity to demonstrate a life lesson on how a mature person apologizes, reconnects and repairs. Every crisis is an opportunity to get closer if you're willing to see things from both sides, with an open heart.
- ***Take a Do-Over.*** When you find yourself starting to raise your voice, stop, breathe, and say “*So sorry...that's my crankiness talking...let's try a do-over....Here's what I meant to say...*” You're taking responsibility for your own irritability, so your kids don't feel like bad people.
- ***Appreciate your child.*** Even if he drives you crazy, there's something about him you love. When you notice, it's like telling him “*More of this, please.*” He'll blossom accordingly.

- ***Never give up on your child.*** Children sense it when we walk away emotionally.

Your child depends on you to hold the vision of her at her best. If she thinks you're giving up on her, she'll give up on herself. Has she strayed? Go get her. But don't join her on the low road. Embrace her with your love and she'll rejoin you on the high road.

- ***Just keep choosing love.*** If you pay attention, you'll notice that life holds constant choices. Should you be harsh with your child because you're frightened that if you aren't, he won't learn? Should you point out to your spouse that you were right? Should you let yourself stop cleaning and take a bubble bath? At core, every choice is between love and fear. Choose love as often as you can. Every day you get fresh chances to interact with your child in a way that heals both of you. Your life is the sum of your choices. You'll make bad ones, sure. But every choice turns your ratio around.

Of course, if you're having a hard day every day, that's a sign that you need to change something in your life. You deserve to feel good. And your child deserves the best of you, not what's left of you. [END BOX]

## **10 Rules to Raise Terrific Kids**

*“In just a month I have seen a big change in my daughter. When I can keep from getting upset, and instead turn things into a game or joke, while still enforcing the rules, she doesn’t tantrum. She listens when I say “No” better is just happier and sweeter. It really is all about me acting better, so she does too!” – Brianna, mother of two year old.*

Parents often ask me what rules are important to raise great kids. It seems to me that the most important rules to raise terrific children are for us, not our children. We begin with taking responsibility for ourselves and end with connection as the ultimate rule. Everything in between is about coaching for the long term.

**1. The most important parenting skill: Manage yourself.** Take care of yourself so you aren't venting on your child. Intervene before your own feelings get out of hand. Keep your cup full. The more you care for yourself with compassion, the more love and compassion you'll have for your child. Remember that your child will do every single thing you do, whether that's yelling or making self-disparaging remarks about your body.

**2. The most important parenting commitment: Be your child's advocate and don't give up on him.** You don't yell at a flower that isn't thriving, you water it. Appreciate who your child is and respond to what she needs, not what you think she should need. Every child deserves at least one person who is 110% on their side.

**3. The most important parenting secret: Discipline, despite all the books written on it, doesn't work.** Punishment always worsens your child's behavior. Avoiding it is the most important thing you can do to raise children who are responsible and considerate. Instead of punishment, guide kindly and set limits on behavior but always empathize with feelings, including the feelings your child has about the limits you set. Both empathy and guidance/limits are essential, neither by itself is successful.

**4. What kids need that no one tells you: A safe place to express feelings while you "listen."** If you want to raise a child who can manage his behavior, he first has to manage the emotions that drive that behavior. And if you want a child who can manage

his emotions, he first needs to know he has a safe place (your arms) to cry and rage where he won't be shushed. Laughter releases the same tensions as tears, so playing with children is also a terrific way to support them in expressing their fears and frustrations. Kids who get help with their big emotions when they're little learn to manage their own feelings (and therefore behavior) at an early age.

**5. What your child wishes you understood: She's just a kid, trying as hard as she can.** Expect age appropriate behavior, not perfection, and keep your priorities straight. Your child is taking shape before your very eyes -- she's still developing, and she'll grow out of most of her inappropriate behavior. Her messy room matters much less than how she treats her little brother.

**6. The most useful mantra: *Don't take it personally.*** Whatever your child does, it will be a lot easier for you to respond peacefully if you notice when you start getting triggered. This isn't about you, it's about your child, who's an immature human doing his best to learn and grow, with your support. Cultivate a sense of humor. This will also help you avoid power struggles. No one wins a power struggle. Don't insist on being right; help them save face. When your buttons get pushed, use it as an opportunity to excavate that button so it isn't controlling you.

**7. What you need to remember when times get hard: All misbehavior comes from basic needs that aren't met.** Meet their needs for sleep, nutrition, chill-out time, cuddling, connection, fun, mastery and safety. Let kids know in advance the behavior you expect. Give them "scaffolding" -- teaching, little by little -- so they can manage

what's expected of them. Children WANT to be successful. (If they don't, that's a relationship problem, not a behavior problem.)

**8. The best parenting expert? Your child.** Let him show you what he needs, from infancy on. Listen with your heart. Be willing to change and grow—and learn to enjoy the process.

**9. The only constant? Change.** What worked yesterday will not work tomorrow, so your parenting approach needs to evolve as your kids do. Each of us seems to get the perfect child to learn whatever we need to know.

**10. What matters most: Stay Connected and never withdraw your love, even for a moment.** The deepest reason kids cooperate is that they love you and want to please you. Above all, safeguard your relationship with your child. That's your only leverage to have any influence on your child. It's what your child needs most. And that closeness is what makes all the sacrifices of parenting worth it.