

KEEP CALM — { AND } — CARRY ON

How to Keep Your Cool While Parenting

It's considered the hardest job in the world for a reason. Parenting takes patience, wisdom, and self-control. Here's a five-step plan to help you choose calmness instead of anger during the most frustrating moments.

By **Christa Melnyk Hines**

While navigating through heavy rush hour traffic, your kids loudly squabble over a video game in the back seat.

In frustration, you snap and yell at them to pipe down. OK, maybe that exact scenario hasn't happened to you, but if you're a parent, it's almost certain that you've experienced something like that—those moments that make you lose your cool.

Managing tense parenting situations in a calm manner can be tricky, even for the most patient parent. Understanding your triggers and how to proactively address irksome issues can go a long way toward creating a more peaceful home and raising emotionally resilient kids.

Luckily, parents can take steps that will help them stay calm even in the most frustrating situations. Here's a five-step plan for parenting without losing your cool.

— { **STEP 1** } —

KNOW THE SIGNS.

"Everybody has their own unique physiological stress signs," says Michele Borba, Ed.D., author of *UnSelfie: Why Empathetic Kids Succeed in Our All-About-Me World*.

Perhaps you clench your teeth and your eyes narrow. Maybe your arms stiffen at your sides and your fingers curl into fists. Not sure what your sign is? Ask your child. "They'll always tell you—'Right before you get mad, Mom, you do that weird thing with your eyes,'" Borba says.

Our youngsters have their own signs too. Maybe your daughter starts yanking at her hair, or your son furrows his brow. "It's almost the sign they're going to use the rest of their life," Borba says.

Once you've identified each other's anger signs, come up with a nonverbal time-out signal to use the moment you feel anger mount. The time-out gives you each

permission to walk away and calm down before resuming the conversation.

If all else fails, “gracefully exit stage left” in the face of rising agitation, recommends child psychologist Dr. Vanessa Lapointe, author of *Discipline Without Damage: How to Get Your Kids to Behave Without Messing Them Up*.

“You create the space rationally and calmly, so that it’s not the child’s fault,” Lapointe says. You may need to find a reason to leave the room and take a few breathes so things can calm down before you continue the conversation. For instance, “You might say, “Oh, I have a load of laundry I need to get in the dryer. I’ll be back in a minute. Hang tight,”” suggests Lapointe.



CREATE A “STRESS BOX” FOR YOUR CHILDREN

Place items that can help your kids decompress for a few minutes after a busy day. Include an iPod loaded with soothing music, books, bubble blowers (especially calming for younger kids), a journal or coloring book, flex bands, and a squishy stress ball. Then make a box for yourself too!

— { STEP 2 } — CHANGE YOUR PERSPECTIVE.

As parents, we sometimes allow our kids’ emotions to rule ours. Take a step back to avoid taking your child’s bad mood personally.

“If we can walk ourselves into the minds of our children so that we are looking at the world through their eyes and really feeling compassion and empathy for them, it’s just going to shift everything in terms of how we approach different kinds of situations,” Lapointe says.

Your child may have had a rough day at school. Maybe they did poorly on a test, got their feelings hurt at recess, or perhaps they’re simply tired and hungry after a busy day. Rather than peppering them with questions and demands when they walk through the door, give your kids time to decompress before moving on with the afternoon.

Need a reminder? Stick a Q-tip in your pocket, Lapointe suggests. Q-TIP is an acronym for “Quit Taking It Personally.”

— { STEP 3 } — KNOW YOUR TRIGGERS.

Parenting is especially challenging when we’re running on fumes. The kindling that causes our temper to flare is often the stress of our overscheduled lives spilling over.

“We’re raising the most stressed-out kids on record,” Borba says. “Why? We ourselves are stressed.”

For many parents, tensions generally run highest between 4:00 and 6:00 P.M. Often we’re rushing to feed hungry, irritated kids, distracted by work issues, helping with homework, and running to get everyone off to extracurricular activities.

In a notebook or on your calendar, jot down times and circumstances when you’re most likely to lose your cool. Once you identify a pattern, make a plan for how you’ll address the stress and better regulate yourself in the future.

Not sure what your stress sign is? Ask your children. They’ll be able to tell you.





— { **STEP 4** } —

PRESS PAUSE, AND BREATHE.

Dr. Cynthia Thaik, a Harvard-trained cardiologist and author of *Your Vibrant Heart*, recommends learning how to proactively manage emotionally-charged situations with simple practices, such as stopping and taking deep breaths.

“If a parent can learn how to develop the ability to push the pause button and become acutely aware of their emotions, but not react to them—just taking a breath—that alone will help to alleviate things,” she says.

Taking deep breaths is such a powerful way to self-soothe that even the Navy SEALs use the technique, Borba says.

“The moment the stress starts to come on, take a deep, slow breath, inhale, hold it, and exhale it twice as long as you inhale. Do it a few times,” she instructs. “Exhaling twice as long as you inhale is the fastest way to get the relaxation response, and it instantly soothes you.”



— { **STEP 5** } —

INVEST IN SELF-CARE.

Adequate sleep, a nutritious diet, and regular exercise will help strengthen your resolve when faced with stressful situations.

“The reality is that as a mother, father, or any kind of caregiver trying to grow up human beings, you are no good to them if you are lying on the ground gasping for air,” Lapointe says.

Even if you can only find 15 minutes a day for yourself, engage in a restorative activity of your choice. By taking time for self-care, you’ll set a valuable example to your youngsters.

Invite your kids to join you in activities that help you manage stress to show them how to cool off when they’re upset or sad. For instance, “Do you want to go for a walk with me? I had a hard day and need some fresh air. That always helps me feel better.”

Also, show your kids how you calm yourself in the midst of frustrating situations that you can’t immediately exit from. For example, if you’re stuck in traffic, turn on soft music, tell each other jokes or riddles, or play a game like *Would You Rather*.

“Our kids watch us, and they learn how to handle life by mirroring what we do,” Borba explains. Developmentally, a child’s brain doesn’t begin gaining the ability to independently self-regulate emotions until the adolescent years.

“Until that settles in, kids are being externally-regulated emotionally by the world around them and, most profoundly, by those they’re most emotionally and otherwise attached, i.e., their parents,” Lapointe says.

12 STRESS-RELIEVING ACTIVITIES FOR MOMS AND DADS

{ Take a power nap } ❖ { Squeeze a stress ball }

{ Read } ❖ { Listen to soothing music }

{ Bike, walk, run, or shoot hoops } ❖ { Do a puzzle }

{ Garden } ❖ { Journal } ❖ { Watch a funny video }

{ Blow bubbles with a child } ❖ { Collage }

{ Play cards or a board game }

WHAT TO DO IF YOU LOSE YOUR COOL

You freak out at your eight-year-old when you discover that he stuck chewing gum to his bedroom carpet—for the third time. Someone cuts you off in traffic, and you yell at them in front of your kids. You and your spouse get into a heated debate during dinner. First, forgive yourself—you're human. Then, make amends.

“Even if you didn't create the situation that led to the upset, the meltdown, or the breakdown in the relationship, it's always the parent's job to fix it,” Lapointe says, who offers this recipe for repair:

- 1. Name what happened:** “I got angry and yelled.”
- 2. Apologize:** “I'm sorry. We are okay.”
- 3. Talk about a future point of connection to close the loop:** “I'm looking forward to going geocaching with you this weekend.”

“If you don't close the communication circle and you haven't landed fully on the apology—the ‘we are okay’ part—and you keep moving on with other things in life, kids will come up with their own catastrophic end,” Lapointe says. For example, a child might think, *Mom doesn't love me anymore.*

By acknowledging the situation and doing the necessary repair work, our kids learn how to manage inevitable conflict in their own relationships.

“The real key is not the arguing. The real key is showing kids how to solve the problem. That's what a lot of kids don't know: how to work the anger out,” Borba says.

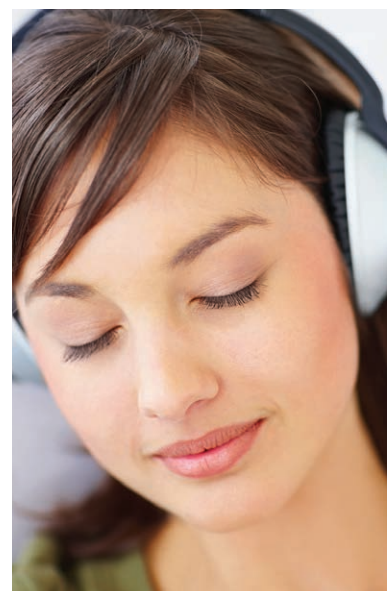
In the case of the driving incident, apologize afterwards and explain your reaction to your kids, “Wow, I'm sorry I yelled! That guy really scared me. I thought we were going to get hit!” Chances are they'll learn to do that back to you, “I'm sorry I yelled at you, Mom. I got a bad grade on my science test, and that's why I blew up.”

WHEN THE ANGER IS OUT OF CONTROL

If you struggle with managing your anger, Thaik recommends getting a full medical evaluation to rule out hormonal imbalances, thyroid issues, or inflammatory, autoimmune, or gut conditions. If everything checks out, ask for a referral to a mental health provider to learn better coping skills.

If you don't get help, Borba warns, your kids may begin to believe that they're somehow responsible for your anger, which can negatively affect their health, empathy levels, and overall resilience.

“There are no take backs when it comes to parenting,” Borba says. “Kids can't interpret your anger, and so they hold it in, and it can become deadly to your relationship and to their self-esteem.” ¶



Christa Melnyk Hines is a connection expert and the author of *Happy, Healthy & Hyperconnected: Raise a Thoughtful Communicator in a Digital World* and *Confidently Connected: A Mom's Guide to a Satisfying Social Life.*

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