

STAYING CALM AS A PARENT WHILE MANAGING CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOUR

It can be extremely frustrating to deal with children's behaviour when they are going through a trying stage, when you have more than one child to deal with, or when they have behaviour problems or extra developmental challenges. Whatever the circumstance – you are not alone. Many parents find themselves teetering on the brink of “losing it” with their children.

They may fear yelling at them will upset them long term, actually hitting or being rough with them which of course is illegal and significantly damaging, or losing their temper and feeling stressed and out of control themselves.

“I used to go into the bathroom and scream into a towel I felt so furious with my toddlers. Being at home, cooped up in the house with a new baby to look after as well – I got to the end of my tether with their behaviour.” – Milly, 34

So what can parents do to stay in calm and control?

PREVENTING PROBLEMS

It's important to know what presses your buttons as a parent and what helps you stay calm. If you know that shopping with a toddler at the end of the day is a nightmare – plan your schedule to avoid this if possible. Make a list of the higher risk times or situations, in terms of when you lose your temper or find it hard to cope. Actively come up with some ideas so you aren't putting yourself in that position too often. Consciously plan to carry through with a simple response when your child misbehaves – this could be the CHANGE model which stands for

- » Contain the situation
- » Hear what they are feeling/wanting
- » Acknowledge their feelings
- » Notice your reactions and stay calm
- » Send clear messages about rules and consequences
- » Encourage the good behaviour when it reappears

BUILDING UP YOUR OWN RESILIENCE

If you aren't looking after yourself, if you feel overloaded, lacking sleep and wishing you had more support, it can be very hard to manage strong feelings. Your resilience takes a dip when you don't look after yourself, so self-care is actually key to achieving good anger management and coping with hard times. If you can carve out even 20 minutes to read a magazine, draw, work in the garden, lie on the couch and rest or do something else that replenishes you most days, you will notice a difference. Squeezing in some exercise of some sort, like a brisk walk to the shops or the park every day will also help. Think about building a support network. It's important to be able to discuss (with friends, other parents or a professional counsellor) what makes you angry and how you can deal with it better. Rediscover some of your old hobbies and interests if you can, this reconnects you in with the person you want to be and lifts you out of the constant self-sacrifice of parenting that can undermine your resilience. It's not an indulgence to look after yourself, it is a vital foundation of good mental health.



STAYING CALM AS A PARENT



ACTING EARLY WHEN TENSION IS RISING

People often we start to feel stressed because of their thoughts. If your child is misbehaving you may find yourself thinking “That’s it – he’s doing it again! I can’t stand that!” which escalates your stress levels. Catch yourself thinking this way and reframe calmly to something more helpful like, “This is challenging, but I can handle it calmly – we will get there.” Try to monitor your stress levels and head off poor behaviour by offering options and showing empathy for what your child is feeling. Don’t just soldier on until you feel like you are going to blow your top, act early. Remember, It’s usually NOT deliberate but more about them trying to get a particular message across to you.

DEFUSING THE SITUATION

Sometimes you can identify certain things that will help defuse poor behaviour or tantrums. You may find that when your child is feeling rebellious that putting on loud music and dancing with them, or reading a story or having a cuddle or playing with the dog tends to help. Observe carefully the effective ways that you might defuse potentially stressful situations. Making a joke may work, changing the subject, or just saying something like “I can see you are getting bored shopping but it will only be 5 minutes more, let’s pretend we are dinosaurs”. This kind of fun distraction works for some kids, rather than focusing on the difficult behaviour.

MANAGING ‘IN THE MOMENT’

Tell yourself this will be over soon- it won’t last too long. Focus on your breathing, take deep breaths and remain business like with the kids - rather than screaming at them to get in the bath when they are told to, firmly repeat “It’s time to get in the bath now”. Some people find it helps to shrug their shoulders or consciously relax their muscles and shake out their hands. You might go to the bathroom, splash some water on your face and take a quick break or go outside for some fresh air, then continue managing the situation. Try to contain what’s happening and calm things down – you will have time to think about addressing the issue afterwards. Avoid the long lectures or berating your child, just give them a clear message about rules and consequences and leave it at that.

“One of the good strategies I learnt is a funny one – I used to imagine there was a hidden camera and I was in a parenting video. I would then try to manage things as calmly and well as I could. I did this because I noticed I was dealing with things much better in public than I was at home! I was hitting the roof at home because I felt I could, but later I would feel guilty. This worked well for me.” – Jason, 30

RESETTLING AFTERWARDS

Give yourself some time to calm down. It’s natural to feel upset after stressful events. Use deep breathing and play some soothing music if necessary. Try having a quick shower or take a break outside. Be kind to yourself and concentrate on managing over the coming hour rather than thinking too far ahead. Go for a walk to the shops with your child or a drive in the car if that will help. If you do feel you have acted inappropriately, yelled at the kids or frightened them, apologise and give them a cuddle. Don’t make excuses but try to explain that you were overloaded or very tired. Be clear with them that it’s the difficult behaviours that are the problem- not them personally. Reassure them that they are safe and loved. Seek help from a counselling organisation or through your GP if you can’t manage your temper. This is a great opportunity to learn new strategies for coping better, but it takes a courageous person to admit they may need more support.

LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE

It’s important to show some empathy for yourself as well. Kids can be incredibly aggravating and almost all of us crack at some point. However it’s important not to be too hard on yourself if you behave badly, but rather to seek the extra support or learn the skills you need. You definitely don’t have to just keep trying to cope on your own. There are some useful videos on the Raising Children Network you can watch on behaviour management and managing your own feelings as well. You may also want to have a chat with someone trained in helping parents with these kinds of challenges.

Call drummond street services for assistance on (03) 9663 6733.