

POSITIVE PARENTING: KEEPING YOUR COOL

Positive parenting is an art, a gift to both parent and child. The parent-child bond remains as a constant in an ever-changing world and is the most powerful force for creating personal and global peace. Although families come in many styles, the human need for loving relationships endures forever. Parents who are empowered with effective tools are better able to create these enduring bonds in the most favorable way.

What are these tools? Are the tools one size fits all? How does a parent know which tools to use in a given situation? Some of the traditional tools have gone out of favor. Tactics such as controlling children by force, yelling, shaming, punishing and spanking are considered abusive in today's culture. 25 years ago a parent who spanked her child in public was accepted; 15 years ago she was suspected; now she would probably be confronted by onlookers or reported to the authorities. At the very least most people would be uncomfortable viewing such behavior. There are better ways to promote compliance and cooperation while preserving a good relationship between parent and child. Spanking and forceful coercion do little to create or strengthen this bond.

It is important for parents to realize that they are modeling appropriate behavior for their children. Remaining calm and centered under pressure shows the child how to behave in conflict and teaches a valuable life skill. When the adult is out of control, the child has nowhere to turn for emotional safety. A child may shut down or become reactive to find a way out. Adults have a far more positive impact and promote true learning when they remain in control of themselves.

Here are some tips for regaining and maintaining your "cool" when you feel your temper soaring out of control.

1. Declare a "Mommy moment" or a "Daddy moment". Taking a break for 3 to 5 minutes or more to regroup your thoughts and emotional composure will often defuse a tense situation. Parents and child can use this time to cool off, and to reflect on what has happened. This is the equivalent of a mutual time out. The critical point is to avoid damaging the relationship by angry exchanges that will further inflame the conflict and cause unnecessary hurt. Be sure the child is in a safe place for this break.
2. Remember that conflict resolution comes from a place of peace. Refrain from angry, accusative, shaming and demeaning interactions such as shouting and screaming. In order to solve the problem it is important to see it clearly and rationally. Regaining your composure (see #1) is a prerequisite for having a positive outcome.
3. Use "I" statements to establish the issues and to begin the dialogue. Even a 2-year old child will respond to a sincere and direct statement about how the

parent feels. “I am very upset right now” works better than “You make me so angry” when dealing with a misbehavior. “I” statements show ownership of your own feelings, alert the other person to your feelings, and keep the door open for discussion. Accusations and blaming create defensiveness, resistance, shame and fighting back.

4. State the reason for the upset in clear, unemotional tones with neutral eye contact and body posture. Keep your statements brief, especially with a young child. They do not listen to your tirade anyway because they cannot process it. It is much more difficult to hear a correction or feedback when the emotional content overwhelms the words. A direct statement such as “I get upset when you hit your sister” presents a non-arguable fact. Follow this statement with a short restatement of the rules or limits. “The rule is no hitting.” Again, this is a non-arguable fact.
5. Treat misbehaviors as mistakes rather than as fatal flaws in the child’s character. Promote reparation of mistakes such as:
 - Apologizing
 - Shaking hands or hugging the injured party
 - Doing something nice for the person who was hurt
 - Ask the child to suggest a better way to handle his anger and how to make it up to the other

This approach empowers children, as well as adults, to learn from their mistakes as they take responsibility for their actions and attitudes.

Apologizing for angry outbursts is just as important for parents as it is for children, and shows that we are all human. By respecting our children we create an emotionally safe environment and keep the lines of communication open.