

No More Button-Pushing

How to Stop Reactive Parenting

Kay Kosak Abrams, Ph.D.



Dear Dr. Kay,

We recently heard you speak at our child's nursery school. You talked about your monthly "Parenting Coffeehouse" that teaches parents how to parent with less bribing and less reactivity. My husband and I felt like you were talking directly to us! We have three boys, ages 3, 5 and 7. It feels like all we do is threaten and yell to get our kids to listen. We don't really mean what we say, but it feels like we have to scream before they take us seriously. Could you please tell us how to parent without reactivity? I think we will post your answers on the refrigerator and read it every day...

Dear Parent:

It sounds like you are caught in the vicious cycle of negative escalations and subsequent depletion. Somewhere along the way you lost your authority. The more we scream and threaten, in a knee-jerk, angry fashion, the more desperate we are, and our children know it.

Actions speak louder than words, and words fall upon deaf ears when affect takes over. Most children respond to anger with a "fight or flight" response. They may shut down, which could look like a meltdown, or a runaway train. Alternatively, they may fight, which is when they talk back, scream or refuse to cooperate and start hitting or kicking.

The other, rather absurd but absolute, truth is that children get excited when emotions take over (affect) and start provoking just to have control over the attention they get by "pushing our buttons." When we get hooked, by launching into defense mode, we start arguing, bargaining and negotiating, and the game is on. I call it the "gotcha game." When they "gotcha," and the emotions are flying, our children know there is a good chance they can make us feel what they don't want to feel (mad and frustrated) because they did not get their way. Or, even

worse, they can distract you from reasoning and manipulate you into giving in out of sheer exhaustion.

In 1997, I started speaking to parents at schools. By the year 2002, I was more than aware that feelings of fear, doubt and fatigue were plaguing today's parents. Maybe we are too often chasing the dollar, sleep-deprived or out to make our kids "happy." The result is a lot of threatening on the fly and focusing on the ends rather than the means. While your kids will likely manage and make it to adulthood, there is a much more sane way to parent. It does require mindfulness, which means you have to be proactive. I will try to give you the best of the philosophy and "take home tools" from the Parenting Coffeehouse:

- When you decided to pass along your DNA, you got hired for a position without a job description and with little or no training. For many parents, the loving and nurturing or playful part of parenting is easy, while the managing of behavior is not. This is where skill is necessary.
- We parent so that our children can survive and thrive in the world in which they live. If we parent with values that are significantly different from the current culture, our children will have more difficulty adapting.
- The first and most important step in parenting is to think about your values and goals, to know your priorities. This will help you as you make lifestyle decisions that are compatible with your values.
- We begin parenting from the outside-in, meaning that we give more physical presence and structure to young ones and expect more

independence as they grow. Children are concrete and thrive on limits and directions. As our children mature, we give them a greater voice because they are able to tolerate affect, delay impulses, apply reasoning skills and practice good judgment. That is when we negotiate reasonable rules.

- My parenting work is about the *process* of parenting. It is about the means more than the ends. I see parents running to books for a "fix it" approach. They want to find something that works and use it over and over, and they stop relying on their own wisdom. Know thyself, and know thy child. To parent effectively, you have to know your own values, temperaments and needs, as well as your children's. Only then, can you carefully set up a system of rules that work for each of you and all of you.
- When we have to cope with an authority figure who is moody and inconsistent, our ability to behave and make "right choices" deteriorates. We can parent consistently and more objectively when we have time to step back and think.
- Impulsivity and reactivity beget impulsivity and reactivity. Short of a "life or death" situation, there is no parenting moment where you do not have the privilege to stop and think. Remember, "An emergency on their part does not constitute an emergency on your part."
- Do not get "hooked." Your ability to wait or ask your children to wait, your ability to breathe, think and maintain a calm, clear tone, demonstrates for them exactly the maturity you would like them to acquire.

continued on page 86



Is your Child Sad, Having Trouble Sleeping, or Not Enjoying Things?

If so, he/she may suffer from major depression.

NIMH would like to talk to you about participation in an ongoing depression study for children and adolescents.

Symptoms of depression can also include:

- Hopeless thoughts
- Recent weight gain or loss
- More time spent alone
- Losing interest in favorite activities
- Being more tired than in the past

Participation includes:

- Medical evaluations
- Psychotherapy or treatment medication
- Brain imaging
- Outpatient visits over 8 weeks at the NIH Clinical Center

Participants must:

- Be 9-17 years old
- Be otherwise medically healthy
- Not be taking any psychiatric medications

**Thorough evaluation & participation provided free of charge.
Travel reimbursement available.**

For more information call: 301-496-5645 (TTY: 1-866-411-1010)



National Institute of Mental Health
National Institutes of Health, Department of Health & Human Services





PHOTOGRAPHY
by Design

Children's Portrait Specialist
by Appointment
703-430-7312

VISA MasterCard

visit us on the web -
www.photographybydesign.com

A good marriage takes work!

Are you ready?

Develop communication skills, intimacy, self-knowledge and mutual support.

Couples therapy group - combining the power of Imago relationship therapy with the group process.

An eight-session group is forming now
Saturday morning and weekday evening

Suzanna Hillegass RN, MSW
703 • 256 • 6513 • 301 • 984 • 0584 x6

GUTTMAN & PEARL
ASSOCIATES

GREAT HAIRCUTS, GREAT VALUE!

\$2 off any haircut!

Shampoo and Cut Included

CASCADES MARKETPLACE 703-444-5855	SPRINGFIELD MALL 703-719-9791
DULLES TOWN CENTER 703-433-1440	COLUMBIA MALL 410-740-6665
FAIR OAKS MALL 703-359-2887	CONGRESSIONAL PLAZA 301-816-3098
NORTH POINT VILLAGE CENTER 703-689-2665	LAKEFOREST MALL 301-948-7020
SMOKETOWN STATIONS 703-670-3400	LAUREL SHOPPING CENTER 301-317-4444

www.cartooncuts.com

Voted "Best Hair Salon for Children" in Metro DC

May not be combined with any other offers. Bang trims excluded.
Valid thru 7/31/04 Code 34




Montgomery Montessori Institute

Shaping The Future of Education

Teach in
Montessori Early Childhood Classrooms
(2 1/2 through 6 year olds)

Call today for catalog and information

10500 Darnestown Road
Rockville, Maryland 20850
(301) 762-4544 • (301) 279-2799

No More Button-Pushing

How to Stop Reactive Parenting

continued from page 85

- Your children are indeed "listening," but they are not cooperating or complying. Stop the "let's make a deal" parenting. Tell your children that you are going to mean what you say and say what you mean (most of the time) and let them know when a command is not about choice. It is about cooperation. So watch your tone of voice and do not ask a question if you want compliance. It is not, "Do you want to clean up now?" if what you mean is, "It is time to clean up."

- Your child is more able to respond to directives that are specific and age-appropriate. Focus on what is expected rather than attending to the negative behavior. For example, "Speak in your 4-year-old voice so I can help you," is more specific and emphasizes the behavior you want to reinforce, rather than "Stop the whining!" The emphasis on the negative actually reinforces the negative behavior!

- Be matter-of-fact about your requests. Not too much emotion. Think RN in the emergency room. And, after you have said what you mean to say and expect compliance, do what I call, "Run the vacuum!" That means walk away and get busy. Move forward rather than harping on the behavior, begging or nagging, which is a form of irresistible attention.

- If you find that you are screaming and threatening more than 30 percent of the time, step back and ask yourself why you are out of fuel. You may be depleted from overworking or poor time management. You may not be nurturing yourself. You may have too much guilt and fear. Find out what is undermining your calm and your confidence. If you are overly stressed, it is time to make some changes. If your mood swings are severe, it is time to consult your health care professional.

- Only you are responsible for how you manage your needs in order to have the reserves it takes to manage your child's needs. Start setting limits for yourself. And when you cannot and the source of your stress is not under your control, be honest about this with your children, and be realistic about how much you can give. If possible, delegate. Find ways to take it easy without sacrificing your authority and consistency.

- Often we are at risk for being reactive when we are not present. Observe yourself as you manage your children. Watch what happens to your ability to parent when you are trying to do too much at once or when you are present but you are elsewhere. You will notice you are at greater risk of feeling agitated, so adjust your expectations to reality, and you will be less disappointed and frustrated.

- Finally, and most importantly, a warning. Behavior gets worse before it gets better when the parenting or management style changes. So have faith!

Parenting is about teaching and directing. Managing behavior is a job that is not about feelings. Think like a teacher. Set up a system of activities and rules that are consistent with those goals. Make certain you have enough fuel in your tank to maintain the kind of calm clarity you need to be an effective manager. Expect to be a broken record, and come to a Parenting Coffeehouse to learn more, share more and practice confident parenting!

Kay Kosak Abrams is a clinical psychologist in private practice in Montgomery County. Her mission is to bring psychology to the community through writing and public speaking. Please join "Dr. Kay" for her monthly "Parenting with Confidence" coffeehouse every second Wednesday of the month. Log onto www.kayabrams.com for more information and to register.