

Calm Voices, Calmer Kids

Sometimes it's hard to keep your cool, but less yelling means better communication

Beth Arky

Before hopping aboard the roller coaster ride called parenthood, people *sans* kids have likely witnessed exasperated moms and dads losing it in Aisle 5 and thought smugly, “I’m *never* going to yell at *my* kids.”

And then they have families of their own and reality sets in. For as their munchkins reach each much-anticipated [developmental milestone](#), they acquire some less desirable skills as well. So a 2-year-old who “scribbles spontaneously” may very well exhibit her newfound talent all over freshly painted walls and prized furniture, while emerging language allows her to repeat certain choice words again and again, including the ever-popular “No!”

Parents know that in the midst of the mayhem, staying calm (aka not yelling) is a golden rule. But unless you're made of stone, it's pretty tough to maintain a measured tone when you're dealing with kids day in and day out. When parents yell, “they've lost it,” says Dr. Steven G. Dickstein, a child and adolescent psychiatrist. “They're overwhelmed with anger or frustration.”

So why is it so important to be firm — without raising your voice?

What's wrong with yelling?

- Upping the ante, losing the message: Yelling often fails to get the point across because emotions can overcome the message. It will also likely escalate the situation, and the child's aggression, be it verbal or physical.
- Heard it all before: If parents yell all the time, Dr. Dickstein notes, “kids may either shut down or ignore it because it's nothing new.” Adds Kara Gebhart Uhl, a mother of three and the blogger behind Pleiades Bee, “Sometimes, a whispered ‘I'm very disappointed with your actions’ is much more startling to a child than a screaming rant.”
- Hard on self-esteem: We know that yelling and harsh parenting are associated with lower [self-esteem](#) for kids, and can affect their performance in school. Kids who are the object of verbal aggression are [at risk for aggressive or disruptive behavior](#). Dr. Dickstein cautions that when mom or dad yells, kids may feel the parent doesn't “love them or even like them” and can only criticize.

- Missing out on the positive: When yelling is the chronic mode of communication, both children and parents are missing out on the chance to form positive, affectionate bonds. And for kids predisposed to [anxiety](#) and [depression](#), internalizing these negative interactions may be the tipping point.
- You feel bad, too: Meanwhile, [blowouts can leave parents feeling guilty, frustrated and demoralized](#). Adults who express anger in negative ways increase their chronic stress, which contributes to health problems.

Why calmer is better

Addressing inappropriate behavior calmly enables you to focus on teaching the child what's problematic about his behavior, and following through with effective consequences.

- Modeling behavior is major: When parents practice healthy self-regulation, it helps kids learn how to [self-regulate themselves](#). Mom Regina Myers testifies that when she turns the volume way down, her “teenager responds much better and yells less himself!”
- Kids feel safer. The best style of parenting features “a high degree of nurturing, firm but kind,” says clinical psychologist Melanie Fernandez. As much as children and teens may act like they want control, what really makes them feel safe are calm, consistent, fair authority figures. (There’s a reason why some parents look to Dog Whisperer [Cesar Millan for child-rearing tips](#). After all, good parents must be leaders of their pack, um, family.)

If you work on specific strategies that help yourself feel calmer, you can help your children learn to regulate better.

Tips for Parents

Identify problem interactions: Pinpoint the recurring problems that frequently set you and your kids off. If [getting out the door for school in the morning](#) is a chronic issue, solutions might include laying out their clothes and showering the night before, or everyone waking up a bit earlier. Try to break it down into steps you can tackle calmly

Create consistency: With younger kids, it helps to create a set routine with [simple, one-step directions](#) that could include visual aids, not to mention plenty of labeled praise and rewards.

Consider triggers: Being aware of the context of the behavior allows for calmer responses. If [we recognize when a child is cranky](#) because he missed his snack or is overtired, it can be easier to temper our own frayed feelings.

Understanding = patience: It's also important for parents to know and understand their children's capabilities, since this can help them become more patient. Understanding her son's issues — he was diagnosed with [sensory processing disorder](#) — was “a game changer” for Long. You can become calmer, she says, when you “accept kids as they are, love them as they are, and recognize that half the problem is how you react.”

Time management: Trying to do too much causes stress. “The times I lose it are the times when I'm already overtaxing myself,” Long says. “The time to do bills is not when the kids are at the table doing an art project.” She notes that parents trying to multi-task increases the risk of kids misbehaving. “Just be there with your kids; it's less likely they'll throw their breakfast on the floor.”

Count to 10: All the parents interviewed for this article had one key piece of advice: Take a break and breathe. It's important to recognize when you're about to lose control so you can step away from the situation, even leaving the room when you can do it safely. (A mom who tells her child she's taking a time out is [modeling self-calming behavior](#).) “I'm not a yeller,” Uhl says. “But when I feel myself becoming hot with frustration and I hear myself getting louder and louder, I stop, check myself, take a deep breath and start over.”

Disengage: Actively [ignoring problem behaviors](#) is another strategy that helps stop parents from yelling. If you disengage from the situation until you regain your composure, you won't be feeding the fire. (This cannot be done when a child is being aggressive or destructive.) Instead, by responding positively to only desired behavior, parents reinforce what they want vs. what they don't want. Plus, by allowing kids to practice “slowing their engines down” on their own, without parental prompts, they're learning how to handle frustration.

Learn to let go and when to laugh it off: Along with ignoring comes learning to loosen up. “If the snack ends up on the floor,” Long says, “instead of getting mad at the kids, I'll say, ‘Oh no, you made a mess, let's clean it up together.’ Do what you have to do to make it easier on yourself.”

Seek support: Long adds that it also helps to have a safety net of friends and relatives for those extremely bad days when you don't feel you can calm yourself down and need to call in reinforcements. Blogs, [support groups](#), other parents and clinicians can all help by assuring parents they aren't alone.

Own up to your feelings: Depending on the age and developmental level of the child, parents may, after things have calmed down, model for their kids how to talk about feelings. “You can tell them you're not feeling respected or you're feeling ignored,” Dr. Dickstein says. Dan Janzen, who has had “a hotheaded moment or two” with his son, 9, and daughter, 6, says he tries to give them “a way to understand the yelling—it's not because *they're* bad kids; it's because *I* lost my temper. ‘I'm sorry I lost my temper — that was kind of rough, and I [shouldn't yell at you](#). But do you understand why I got little frustrated?’ And then we have a brief conversation about the situation.”

“I also make a point of always following up quickly with something along the lines of, ‘Even when I lose my temper, I still love you,’” Janzen adds. “I think the running theme is to try to keep the eruptions from undermining their trust or security. No matter what happens, I’m still the same slightly ridiculous but well-intentioned daddy who loves them.”