

EmpoweringParents®

CHILD BEHAVIOR HELP

ARTICLE

HOW TO KEEP CALM AND GUIDE YOUR CHILD TO BETTER BEHAVIOR THIS YEAR

by *Debbie Pincus MS LMHC*



Have you been looking back on the last year, reflecting on how things went with your child? If so, perhaps you feel frustrated when you think about his or her behavior—and your reaction to it. Maybe you feel like no matter what you do as a parent, nothing changes. But understand that positive change can happen in your family. You're not stuck in those negative patterns—you really do have the power to improve things, starting today.

What Is Your Dance with Your Child?

As you look back, it can be helpful to remember what you wished for last year around this time. Maybe you wished for a year of less fighting with your kids, or dreamed that your children would become more responsible and motivated. Perhaps you wished for your defiant teen to turn into a more cooperative one, or for your mate to stand up for you more. Maybe you longed to when things got chaotic, or hoped to parent from your principles instead of from anxiety. As difficult as it is to reflect at times (especially if things didn't turn out the way you'd hoped), if you can view last year with curiosity and observation rather than with regret and harsh judgments, you'll have a better chance of improving things now.

"Between your child's action and your reaction, you have the space to decide how it is best to think, feel and respond. You have a choice."

It's important to realize that every relationship has elements of a dance within it. And as we all know, there are some great dance moves, and some that have gotten a little old and need to be retired. Do a self-inventory by standing back and observing yourself as you interact with your children and other family members. Think about your dance moves, and ask yourself the following questions:

- ⌚ What is my dance with my child? Do we keep having the same fight?
- ⌚ Which steps in the dance do I need to change? Do I get caught in a power struggle and end up yelling or giving in?

Even if it feels like the dance you do can't be altered, know that you can start changing those negative patterns with your child right now. (I'll tell you more about how you can do that in a moment.)

Related: [How to help change your child's behavior today.](#)

Repeat After Me: "I am not in control of my child's behaviors, thoughts, and feelings—But I *am* in control of my own."

When we as parents feel responsible for our child's behaviors, thoughts, feelings and outcomes in life, we get highly invested in their behavior. We tend to believe that who they are is a reflection of us.

When parents feel this way, there is an expectation and pressure to shape their kids into who they believe they need to be; otherwise we can't calm down. We feel anxiety—which leads to reactivity—as we attempt to "shape them up." In response, our kids then react to us—usually with some form of defiance. That dynamic can contribute to a disappointing and frustrating dynamic in the family. Why is this kind of reactivity so destructive? Because it's an emotional reaction that does not lead to learning, problem solving, resolution or self direction—let alone positive connection.

If last year was a rough one with your kids, chances are it's because you and your kids were more reactive to each other. Tough outside circumstances might have increased your stress levels. Chronic anxiety along with stresses like a death, job changes or a move, aging parents, or sickness increase the chance for more reactivity in the family. But remember, while we can't control many things that happen to us, one thing you *can* take control over is how you learn to respond to stress and difficulty in your life.

Related: [ODD child won't listen? Give him "fail proof" consequences.](#)

Stop Reacting—and Start *Responding*

Why is it important to be thoughtful rather than over react to your child this year, and every year moving forward? Responding is a way of slowing down, staying calm and answering someone thoughtfully rather than letting that knee-jerk reaction kick in. One way to do this is by realizing you have control over your emotions. Between an action and your reaction, you have the space to decide how it's best to think, feel and respond. You have a choice. You are never fully at the mercy of someone else's behavior. So if your young child is rolling around on the floor because she doesn't want to get dressed, don't start rolling with her. Instead, pause and think of an effective response.

Perhaps you'll decide to put your headphones on while she rolls and screams and works through her feelings. Or, maybe you'll decide to provide her with a choice: "You can choose which outfit to wear. After you put it on, we'll go to your friend's house. Which one do you choose?" Or, if your teenage daughter is slamming doors and rolling her eyes, don't slam and roll with her. Instead you can very quietly ask her what's upsetting her. Or you can avoid engaging with her until she's worked off her steam.

Once you hit that "pause" button and choose an effective response based on your sound principles rather than a knee-jerk reaction, you are in charge of yourself and your relationships. When you're in charge of yourself, you won't need to try to control your child or anyone else, for that matter. By managing yourself instead of your child—by stepping out of his box and into your own—you will have given him the emotional space to learn to be in charge of himself. And he will be calm enough to think for himself and solve problems with more maturity.

Related: [The Calm Parent Program](#) can help you stay calm while you implement change with [The Total Transformation](#).

Say These 5 Things and Have a Calmer Year with Your Kids...

Here are five things to say to yourself that will help you stay calm with your kids—and will help to contribute to a calmer and more peaceful year.

1. "I am not my child and my child is not me. He can behave one way and I am free to choose how I will behave, no matter how chooses to act."
2. "I can use my own parenting values to guide me when my emotions get triggered. I am fully responsible to manage my own behavior. My children cannot 'make' me lose it."
3. "I am responsible and in charge of how this year goes. I am not in control of how anyone else behaves or thinks, but I am fully in charge of how I behave and think."
4. "It's not possible to 'control' others and try to get them to be how I want them to be so I can feel like a successful parent. If I do, my children will most likely fight back in their own way. I can instead work to shape myself." (Usually kids follow our lead.)
5. "I can work on appreciating my children for who they are and 'worry' less about them." (They will more likely come to appreciate themselves and feel less anxious about who they are when you can do this.)

Once untangled, you will be calm and emotionally separate enough to guide your child. You can then hold him accountable by providing consequences if he hasn't followed the rules or hasn't done what was expected of him. Do it matter-of-factly rather than with too much emotion. Disengage if your child has lost control of himself. Once he is calm, you can discuss with him other options for solving a problem, rather than screaming, yelling and trying to hold others hostage. He will learn that certain behaviors are not effective because he simply does not get what he wants when he behaves in those negative ways. And you can show him better options through your own self-control and through problem-solving discussions. From your calm separateness you will be able to guide your child to better behavior and a more peaceful year.

Empowering Parents is a weekly newsletter, online magazine and blog published by the Legacy Publishing Company. Our goal is to empower people who parent by providing useful problem-solving techniques to parents and children. For more information, visit <http://www.empoweringparents.com/>



For more than 25 years, Debbie has offered compassionate and effective therapy and coaching, helping individuals, couples and parents to heal themselves and their relationships. Debbie is the creator of the *Calm Parent AM & PM* program and is also the author of numerous books for young people on interpersonal relations.

Print this page

From the December 2013 issue of Empowering Parents (<http://www.empoweringparents.com>) a free online magazine for parents.