

# How to Be a Calm Parent

by

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Except for those who've had frontal lobotomies or are under heavy sedation, all parents get angry with their children from time to time. This sometimes leads to yelling, shouting matches, and angry remarks. But expressing anger is not the problem here. Of course, we should feel free to let children know when we're angry with them! But there are constructive and destructive ways of doing so. Destructive ways of expressing anger include hurtful remarks like, "You drive me crazy," "I could just strangle you sometimes," and "I wish you were never born!" as well as angry commands like, "Shut up," "Calm down!" "Quit your whining right now!" and "Straighten up, Mister!" These are almost always spoken in a loud and punitive tone. They're meant to satisfy our need for revenge or soothe our own hurt feelings rather than solve the problem at hand. In short, angry remarks are reactive rather than deliberate. Do they help? Sure, at first they allow us to vent the bitter feelings that have built up inside us so that we feel better, at least temporarily. But eventually, we wind up regretting our words. Unbridled caustic attacks also have the negative effect of inciting children to retaliate with their own hostile comebacks, withdraw in fear, or think less of themselves. When they do any of these, they're certainly not reflecting on their own behavior and ways to correct it!

Do they learn when we vent our anger on them? Of course they do: they learn to avoid our wrath at all costs—being sneakier, lying, pelting us with rationalizations for their misbehavior, and so on. These, however, foster external direction, because the child must analyze external cues like our mood, the recent events of our day, the way we're treating other people, our level of awareness, and our facial expression to determine what he can get away with.

Constructive ways of expressing anger have a purpose—to let children know that what they’re doing is bothering us. One of my favorite ways of doing this is the “four step approach.”

1. State your anger. It’s okay to do this in a louder than normal voice, but not in a screaming, vindictive, or disparaging tone:

“I’m very angry with you right now!”

2. State why you are angry. Try to include one of the two root emotion behind the anger: hurt or fear.

“I am upset that you walked all over my freshly mopped floor with your muddy boots. It makes me feel hurt that you don’t care about how hard I worked to clean house today.”

3. State your expectations for them.

“I don’t want you to do that any more. And I want you to find a way to clean up this mess for me.”

4. Request an acknowledgement.

“Is that clear?” or “Will you agree to that?”

There are other phrases we can use to replace our destructive expressions of anger. For instance, instead of saying, “Shut up!” when a child interrupts,

- try using an “I” message: “I can’t listen and talk at the same time. ”
- try delivering a logical consequence: “You will need to leave the room until I am finished talking to Aunt Sally. I can’t concentrate on our conversation when you interrupt.”
- try the minimalist approach: Put your index finger to your lips and firmly say, “I’m talking.”
- try making an impartial observation: “I see you’re interrupting, again.”

If you’re a den mother for a Boy Scout troop and one of the boys is disrupting the rest of the group during a trip to the Natural Science Museum,

- try using a limited choice: “Jonathan, when you decide to calm down, then all of us can continue our tour.”
- try a logical consequence: “No one can get the full benefit of this field trip when you’re acting up like this, Jonathan. I have to talk with your parents when they come to pick you up”
- try questioning: “Jonathan, how are Boy Scouts supposed to behave in public?” (When Jonathan answers, he must recall the rules of behavior set by his troop.) “Why do you think we have that code of behavior?” (Jonathan answers, reflecting on the purpose behind those rules.) “What do you need to do to make it up to the tour guide and your fellow scouts?” (Jonathan answers, considering ways he might make amends.)

Rather than reacting against our children in exasperation, these alternatives allow us to use anger to help communicate our feelings and makes it easier for them to reflect on the effects their choices have on others, on ways to make a better choice in the future, and on how to make amends for their misbehavior. By turning their misbehavior into an opportunity for introspection, we come one step closer to raising children who have the strong reasoning skills they need to have complete conscious control over their choices: a crucial skill to have in today’s world of temptations and distractions. And you thought this was only about sparing our own frayed nerves!

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