

How to React When Kids Push Your Buttons

By Marilyn Suttle

Crash! Your child drops her glass on the floor. There's sticky juice splattered everywhere. What do you do? Your toddler unravels an entire roll of toilet paper into the toilet and flushes. What do you do? Your kids are playing a little too quietly. You walk in to find them decorating their bedroom with finger paints. What do you do?

If you're feeling calm you'll probably handle mishaps by looking for solutions. You might have your child help clean up the mess. But when you're feeling stressed, frustrated, or angry, your first reaction is likely to be anything but helpful. How can you effectively discipline your children when emotions get the better of you?

People with food allergies plan ahead when dining at restaurants. They are aware that certain items on the menu cause an undesired reaction. They avoid those foods and choose foods that will leave them feeling good. Awareness comes first, then a plan of action.

So it is with parenting. Certain emotions trigger parents to react to their children in undesired ways. We end up insulting the child and invite vengeful or destructive behavior in response to our emotional reactions. Those reactions leave us feeling worst.

Let's face the fact that there will be times in the future that all parents will feel annoyed, frustrated, even furious with their kids. We can prepare a plan of action instead of having a reaction. Ask yourself right now, "Do I make my best decisions when I am angry?" Let's be prepared with a plan before those emotions take over. Planning ahead can go a long way in maintaining healthy discipline and a strong family bond.

Start observing yourself. How do you react to your children when you are feeling irritated, annoyed, or angry? Are you reacting to the situation or to your emotions? Effective parents learn that without a plan, automatic reactions will lead them down an unhelpful path.

Imagine an Olympic ice skater falling during a competition. Without a plan, her reaction might be, "This is terrible! I can't possibly come in first place now." With this thought she begins a downward spiral and her performance falls apart. By planning ahead, she is prepared with a helpful message, "Get up and perform flawlessly." This script allows the skater to continue her performance and keeps her in the competition.

Let's look at some typical reactions to our emotions and set up an alternate action plan. Be in touch with your feelings. "When you consistently get in touch with your feelings you are more connected to everyday situations and more aware of what's really going on in your life." This quote from The Power of Focus, by best-selling author, Jack Canfield, is your first step toward being in control of your actions. By monitoring your feelings, you have a much better shot at effectively handling your children's misbehavior. Have an inner script that registers your feelings and reads. "Here is my plan: ____."

At the dinner table, your 6-year-old son begins eating with his fingers instead of his fork. First identify your feeling, “I’m feeling annoyed.” Then, mentally read your planned script for that emotion.

One script might read, “Children are inexperienced. They need my gentle guidance. I have many skills to rely on.” Without the script an unhelpful reaction might be to swat the child’s hand and say “What’s the matter with you? You’re eating like a pig.” This leads down an unhelpful path. Either the child feels ashamed and his self esteem lowers or he challenges you by escalating the misbehavior and starts snorting like a pig. With your script, you are more likely to respond in a way that engages your child’s cooperation and doesn’t attack him, such as, “Mashed potatoes are to be eaten with a fork.” Having an inner script gives you a thread to hold onto when your emotions get in your way.

When you’re feeling frustrated, do you enter lecture mode? How do you kids react to that? Many tune out lectures, which may escalate your frustration. How do you plan a course of action for times when you’re feeling frustrated? First, notice your feeling. Then play your script. A script might be, “I need to release my growing tension constructively. I can state my feelings and expectations or set up a consequence.” When creating your own script, be sure to include a couple of effective skills you can grab onto and use.

When angry feelings grab us, it’s tempting to yell. Some children look at our anger with mild amusement. When children are bored, they sometimes misbehave just to get attention. As we rant and rave the children are more focused on how our nostrils flare than on what they did wrong. Sometimes we hand out punishments to our children which set them on a path for revenge. They don’t feel remorse. Angry feelings make us overreact, but with a plan we can maintain good discipline.

Let’s set up a script to play when we are feeling angry. First, notice your angry feelings. Second, play your script. “I feel like lashing out, threatening, and forcing but I won’t. I know that just sets up a challenge. I will rely on these skills: I’ll express my anger. I’ll give choices and consequences. I’ll use the term, ‘when’ instead of, ‘if you don’t,’ and stay solution orientated.” Your script might include different parenting skills that work best for you.

Replacing the word “when” for “if you don’t” works wonders toward engaging cooperation. Look at the difference. “*If you don’t* clean up this room right now, you can forget about playing outside today.” Many children would see that statement as a challenge. Replace it with, “*When* this room is clean, feel free to play outside.” Say those statements out loud, which statement would you be most likely to cooperate with?

Sometimes our emotions go into the red. We feel an incredible fury at our little darlings. This is the time we tend to do the most damage, either physically or emotionally. At the boiling point, we are more likely to crush our children’s self worth. We over react, saying and doing things we later regret. What kind of script can we set up for those times that will unleash our unstoppable fury?

Notice your feelings of fury. Mentally play your script, “I’m feeling furious! I’ll breathe deeply and walk away until I calm down. If I can’t walk away, I’ll release my fury without being destructive. I’ll talk about my feelings without attacking my child’s character.”

There are many strong emotions which you may wish to plan a script for including, times you are overtired, rushed, or resentful. By setting up a mental plan of action before those emotions hit, you are safeguarding your family from damaging reactions which take a toll on your relationship and your children’s self image. Children are worth this extra effort.

Even with all this forethought there still may be times you react in ways you later regret. Forgive yourself. Every mistake brings with it an opportunity to learn and grow. If you aren’t satisfied with your reaction, you can set up a more effective plan for next time. With children, there always seems to be a next time.

Marilyn Suttle is a dynamic speaker, author and columnist. Subscribe to her FREE monthly e-newsletter: Life in Balance: Thriving Kids/Thriving Parents, by visiting her web site: WWW.SuttleOnline.NET. © 2005 Suttle Enterprises LLC.