



CUTTING THROUGH *THE* NOISE

Why we yell at our children

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I am a psychologist. I have spent my life's work studying the developing child and the impact of parenting on child development. I know this field inside and out, backwards and forwards. I know that a parenting approach that is both firm and kind is key. I know that being the kind of parent who has swagger and confidence, and who is themselves regulated and settled, will create the best sort of environment in which any child can thrive.

And yet, I have yelled at my kids.

Yup. I have done it. *Many times*. And I will probably do it again. So why is it that even though I have all this expertise, I sometimes still succumb to a *yelly, shouty* outburst? Why is it that as parents we can have the best of intentions to stay calmly in charge, but may still resort to yelling up a storm?

SHOUTING FROM THE MOUNTAINTOP

It has been said that the longest road to be traveled is the one that leads from the head to the heart. While you can *know* everything there is to know about good parenting, actually practicing those things in a heated moment may prove more difficult. This is the difference between brain knowledge and heart knowledge. When parent life

overwhelms, it is the "programming" that you have acquired over your life that wants to take the lead. In those triggered moments you become an amalgamation of your various experiences (especially those of your childhood), your brain is no longer in charge, emotions become your leader, and yelling is the result.

To make sense of why this happens, I like to imagine standing on the peak of a mountain. The views from the top are truly stunning and more than anything we want to maintain our position at the peak. But the slopes are very steep. On one side of the mountain is the kind force. It buoys you up and helps you be a nurturing, understanding, and protective parent who, in terms of developmental stage and age, puts the bar just where your child can jump and provides a soft landing. On the other side of the mountain is the opposing firm force. It pushes you to define boundaries, rules, norms, and expectations with certainty and steadiness. It is based in routines and containment without being harsh. In order to maintain our precarious spot amidst the push and pull of these forces, we must find balance.

The tricky thing is that almost without exception, we don't come into parenthood primed for maintaining the balance of kind and firm. Typically, our own experiences of how we were parented when we were children leak into our present-day parenting and we find ourselves repeatedly tumbling down one or the other side of the mountain.

If the kind side is our subconscious "weakness", we give up necessary firmness when we incline too far in that direction, often out of guilt or a sense of overwhelm. When this happens we are no longer perceived by our children as kind but as spineless and passive. In this state we are not likely speaking our truth with power and grace but are more likely full of resentment for all that we have given up in a thwarted effort to be kind and understanding. Our resentment mounts to the breaking point and—*BAM!*—yelling becomes the unintentional, desperate solution. This lapse into yelling creates more fodder for your guilt, which you attempt to assuage with overindulgent kindness. And so the cycle goes.

If, on the other hand, you tend to tumble down the firm side of the mountain, with kindness nowhere in sight to help you scabble your way back up to balance on the peak, you are experienced by your children as being mean or even a bully. Unable to invoke your logical self, your standards for the things your child should be able to do become developmentally insensitive and you wonder how many more times and/or for how long are you going to have to constantly step in to deal with issues. Your child's normal reactions and behaviors are viewed, through a distorted lens, as being disrespectful. Unable to remain in the present, your old experiences rear up and you explode in the face of pressures which convince you only yelling can relieve.

When you are not firmly planted at the top of the mountain, you inadvertently create an unbearable reality for your child—something that you probably recognize well from the experiences of your own childhood. Children intuitively look to their parents to be their guides and their ultimate protectors. If it happens that you spend more time struggling at the base than you do enjoying the views from the top, your child does not get to look up to you as a safe and capable guide. Rather, they will begin to reject your leadership as they attempt to navigate and protect themselves, becoming what I call "hulk children." They are now in the lead of you, and it is all but impossible to grow up a child who is no longer looking to you as their champion.

YOUR CLIMBING PARTNER

What makes all of this even more interesting is that in families where there are two parents (whether or not they are under the same roof), there is almost always one parent who identifies as kind and the other who identifies as firm. We are all but guaranteed to choose a parenting partner who will occupy the opposite side of the mountain from us—just one of the many invitations we will receive over our life course to figure out our own programming. These two positions typically come to a head with the overly kind parent defending their position by saying, "Somebody needs to have some love and compassion for these kids!" while the overly firm parent defends their position by saying, "Somebody needs to have some rules and boundaries!" Here's the thing—in isolation, both positions are wrong.

It is upon each of us as parents to find our own way to the peak of the mountain and figure out how to maintain our position there. Each parent must manifest their individual firmness and kindness at the same time to prevent the landslide into overwhelm and yelling. What has become very clear from the developmental literature is that "it takes only one." One big person with the courage to show up in a child's life with an abundance of kindness and firmness in order to promote incredible growth and capacity within the child. While it is true that if the second parent is regularly falling down or spends more

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time at the bottom of that mountain, the child will have to recover from that. However, with one parent at the peak of the mountain, the child *will* be able to recover. So focus less on what the other parent is up to and more on how you can embody that within yourself.

SOMETHING TO SHOUT ABOUT

To really take on the challenge of conquering your ascent of the parenting mountain and prevent your jelly-shouty slide down one side or the other, think about the following:

Recognize your programming

Your programs are always trying to run the expedition when the going gets tough. You can figure out a bit about what your exact programs are by thinking back to your own childhood. Look for themes from that time, especially during those moments that felt difficult. What were your hurts in those moments? Did you feel you had to perform to be loved? Did you worry that if you did it wrong you would face rejection from the person meant to love you the most? Were there issues or even just lots of talk of scarcity in your childhood home—of love, money, or food? Did you often feel like things weren't fair? Did you experience your parents as really and truly "getting you" or did you feel misunderstood or alone?

After you have spent some time thinking through those kinds of things, look for how they map onto your reactions to your own children. If your child "misbehaves" (which really isn't a thing since all behaviour is communication and should be a welcomed reality of child development), are you quick to harshly shut it down out of fear that others may think you are a bad parent? When your child is struggling—with things like school, or sports—do you get intensely frustrated and insist on better performance for fear they won't make it? Do you then become angry and shouty when it doesn't work out? Do you feel constantly taken advantage of as a parent or that things just aren't fair? There will always be threads that connect our reactive parenting moments to the reactions we had and experienced ourselves as children.

Cultivate balance

If you are the overly kind, spineless jellyfish parent, time must be spent establishing routines and rules, working on follow-through, and working out compassionate discipline. Ultimately, flexing your firm side. At the same time, you need to be prepared to face the inevitable

push-back that will come. As your child recognizes the changes and experiences some upset around them, you will need to stay present and resist your own programs of guilt and reactivity.

On the flip side, if you identify as leaning more to the firm side, and are often mean, intense, or bullying, you will have to work hard to create much more gray zone space when it comes to the rigidity of your rules and expectations. You will seek to be soft and caring, and to understand exactly who your child is in that moment. Your job will be to find a constant source of heart-filled compassion for your child, quelling the urge that bubbles up in you to shut them down. Discovering and owning the root of why you yell will help prevent it from leaking out of you onto your child.

Set a realistic bar

So often as parents, our frustration and yelling comes from a place of really not understanding what our individual child is capable of. It is dependent on temperament, age and stage, and sometimes day of the week, time of the year, and other larger setting factors that seem irrelevant but that nevertheless have impact on our child's shifting capacity. You must constantly re-evaluate where your child is at and avoid placing the bar too low, which slides quickly into permissive parenting, while also avoiding placing it too high, which will be experienced by your child as harsh. Don't be shy about moving the bar from a heart-centred place of just sensing that this is what is required in a given moment for your child.

Take the lead

If you have had a lot of jelly-shouty moments, you are going to need to spend quite a bit of time re-establishing your lead position. This must flow from a relationship-based power rather than a role-based power. Nurture and spend time on the relationship and watch your child's ability to sense your heart-presence grow as they learn to lean into you. With your heart fully online, you stay one step ahead, firmly planted in the lead, even during the troubling times.

Being one step ahead means *everything* will be your idea.

Your child has a meltdown.

Your response: "Looks like you have lots of shouts that need to get out love, you go ahead."

Your child demands X.

If reasonable and possible, you exclaim in disbelief, "You are not going to believe this! I was already on my way to do X! Isn't that crazy?!"

Your child demands an extra bedtime story.

You respond calmly with, "Oh no my love, tonight is not a two-story kind of night. It's a three-story kind of night!"

And so on. For days and weeks and months. However long it takes for your child to trust that their heart can be safely entrusted to your ultimate care.



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Champion connection

Connection is *everything*. It infuses how you wake up your child in the morning, how you share meals, how you say hello and goodbye, how you discipline, how you respond to anxiety, what you do when your child lies, and so on. If you can make connection your "North Star" in how you parent, you may teeter, but you will not topple. It will guide you out of being too firm or too kind, it will help you on the journey from head to heart, and it will have you ascending to, and maintaining balance at, the peak of the mountain in ways that would be impossible otherwise.

Parenting is a journey. And just like I sometimes slip and slide down the mountain into my yelling self, you will too. Welcome to the club of being human. Remember, it isn't about how many times you fail, and it is about how many times you are courageous enough to stand up and journey on. To dig deep into your own programming so that you can understand yourself anew. To grow *you* so that you can grow your children and so they can ascend the mountain as they become more confident and trusting in you. And then, just watch the miracles that unfold while you each develop into the biggest, best versions of yourselves.

Now then, aren't those views spectacular? •