



## Kris' Corner:

A Series of Articles by Parenting Expert

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### Avoiding the Tornado

#### Calming Ourselves Down and Understanding Pain-Based Behavior

How many times can you remember asking your child to do something and then seeing them become angry or upset as soon as the words are out of your mouth? It could be something simple like asking them to take their shower, or to sit down and do their homework. Then what follows? Perhaps your mind starts racing with thoughts like, "Oh, here we go again!" or "Why does it ALWAYS have to be a fight?" or "This is ridiculous! I'm not asking for the moon! Who's the boss around here, anyway?"

While those thoughts are going through your head, your body may be getting ready for a fight. You may not realize it, but your heartbeat might be speeding up, your muscles may be tensing, your breathing getting shallow, your jaw may be tightening and there may be knots in your stomach. As your autonomic nervous system feels the effects of all the stress hormones going through your body, your reasoning ability, your ability to be clear and rational and especially your ability to be compassionate goes out the window!

So how does the situation usually play out? My younger son gave me a real run for my money and I still remember the way I would lose control. Between the two of us being out of control I had a full—blown tornado on my hands. In the course of this mess I would inevitably do something I regretted later. After it was all over I would feel terribly guilty and like a failure as a Mom.

There is a better way. It's not easy, and it takes practice, but the investment is worth it.

The first step is to recognize that YOU are part of the whole reaction. The reason you are such an important part of this equation is that we are biological creatures who are programmed to need each other for survival. The parent/child relationship is particularly governed by this biology. As a child, when our parent is upset with us it can be very destabilizing. Even though our child seems to be impervious to our approval at times, their biology is very reactive to ours. When we add our anger and frustration to their own, we pour gasoline on the fire. We may be thinking, "I've got to show him who's boss!" Meanwhile, your child actually hears, "Your upset feelings are not legitimate and I will not tolerate you acting this way." The child feels panicked and scared that you are rejecting them with your anger. Consequently, they feel even more out of control. The message has the effect of making him/her less able to be reasonable and rational. And there you have it ... Tornado!

I believe one of the most important jobs we have as parents is to help our children understand their emotions, learn effective tools to calm themselves down, and tolerate all the frustrating and upsetting things that life is going to throw at them. But we have to teach by *example*.

Consequently, we have to learn these tools ourselves first in order to be able to model the behavior for our children. We have to be able to calm ourselves down when they upset us, *before* we go to them to address an issue.

#### EMPATHIC SELF-TALK

Just as those negative messages that fly through our heads when our child triggers us have the effect of causing our whole system to get into a high state of alert (ready to fight), there are messages we can summon up that will have a beneficial effect on us. Try to remember that when your child is at their worst, they are NOT happy. This is not fun for them. They are in "emotional pain". If you can look at your child and say to yourself: "**My child is in emotional pain, this is pain-based behavior**", your whole body will have a different response. Instead of getting ready for battle, when your child is in pain you will experience an urge to *comfort* your child.

For example, if your child comes in the door from school and has a melt-down because you made Rice Krispie treats instead of brownies, chances are this is not about the brownies. In the past, you might have punished them for being disrespectful and ungrateful, and sent them to their room. However, in this scenario, they learn nothing about themselves and their own reactions and behaviors. Instead, they learn that they are “bad”, as their self-esteem goes lower and lower. They know that their behavior was wrong, but they don't know WHY they behaved that way. When our first reaction is to punish, we're actually losing an opportunity for a “teaching moment”. Children need a better understanding of themselves, and as parents, I believe that giving them that self-knowledge is our most important job.

If you don't take their reaction personally, and if you are able to look at your child and see their emotional pain, you may be able to say to yourself, **“This is pain-based behavior, my child is in emotional pain.”** Consequently, you might have a different response to them. When our child is in pain, it engenders in us the urge to comfort. You might say something like “Wow, it sounds like you might have had a really bad day at school. What happened?” This sends the message that you know this is not who they truly are, and that something very upsetting must have caused this behavior. Then you can play “detective” with your child to discover, together, the cause of all this distress. You will get to the **true** source of the pain. Perhaps your child might collapse in your arms in tears and you'll learn that a friend was mean to them that day or that a teacher yelled at them when it wasn't their fault. By helping your child to recognize the origin of their behavior, you will put yourself in a positive position to collectively brainstorm solutions to the problem. This reinforces to your child that you can be a partner with them in their challenges and that they're not alone.

This process is very educational and you will be playing the part of “teacher”. The root of the word “discipline” is “disciple.” We're talking about the Student/Teacher relationship. Educating your child about their behavior and listening to their feelings, will pay off in the long run; your child will mature with good self-esteem and be better able to have compassion and empathy for others. On the other hand, children with low self-esteem have a hard time having empathy for others. They often end up as bullies or followers who are unable to stand up for themselves and frequently succumb to peer pressure.

So try Empathic Self-Talk to calm yourself down the next time your child's resistance is starting to trigger you. Then play detective with them to figure out where these feelings originate, and recognize that you are making good use of a “teaching opportunity”. Not only will your child benefit from the self-knowledge but the two of you will benefit from an enhanced, deeper connection. The parent/child bond will be more secure and you can enjoy each other more fully. When that bond is secure, our channels of communication are open and our children will feel comfortable coming to us for help dealing with difficult decisions. We are setting the stage for a rewarding, life-long relationship with our child.

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For more information, visit [www.healingforchange.com](http://www.healingforchange.com).

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