

Pausing to think about your parenting

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Eight-year-old Pete and his six-year-old brother were constantly squabbling and rowing. Their mother Julie would never get a moments peace before one of them would approach her complaining that the other had hit him or taken his toy or been nasty to him. She found herself getting drawn into their rows trying to 'be the referee' deciding who was right and who was wrong. But this would lead to protests and tears, particularly by Pete who always felt wronged. She often found herself becoming angry and frustrated and this would leave her stressed for the day.

When faced by a conflict or a difficult situation we can find ourselves immediately reacting in a certain way without too much thought or deliberation. Sometimes our immediate reactions are helpful, for example, when we naturally respond to soothe a child who is crying in distress. But other times they can be unhelpful, for example if we react over angrily to a minor challenge from one of our children or if we say something damaging in the heat of a row. Many different things determine how we react to other people and our children. It can be simply a habit (good or bad) that we have developed over the years or it can be a repetition of how we were treated by our own parents in the past, or it can be a function of how stressed or strongly we feel about what is currently happening. In addition, we all have our specific weaknesses; we all have our 'buttons' that when pressed by others make us fly off the handle.

Problems can occur, however, when we get stuck in our reactions or when they become over-rigid and negative. Most problems in families are maintained by patterns of reactions between parents and children that have become fixed over time. In the example above, the fact that Julie jumps in and becomes the referee each time her children squabble may be part of the problem. Maybe getting drawn into an argument about who was right and who was wrong only intensifies the problem.

So how can you break these cycles of reacting? How can you break the patterns of the problem? The first thing you can do is to pause and to take time to think about what is going on. Rather than letting your children 'press your fast-forward button' you decide to press pause, so you can begin to choose how you best want to respond. Consider now how Julie, the mother in the opening example at this chapter, paused and thought through how she wanted to respond to the problem she was facing:

When Julie took time to think about her sons' squabbles she wondered if it had simply become a way for them to get her attention and that it had simply become a habit for her to drop everything and get involved. Thinking about it, she also realised that in the role of referee she generally took the side of the younger boy, which was probably unfair as they were both responsible.

Julie realised that she did not want her sons to be dependent on her to sort out every squabble and wanted to teach them to sort things out themselves. She was also unhappy with the way she was acting angrily in the argument (which clearly wasn't working) and she wanted to find a calmer more respectful way to help her sons sort this problem out.

So Julie decided to 1) Instead of jumping in to referee when his two sons got into a squabble, she decided to back off, saying to them, 'Listen, the two of you are old

enough to sort your disagreements out.' 2) If the squabble escalated and she had to intervene, she would not be the judge or referee, but firmly and calmly tell the children that they had to take time apart for a few minutes (or the disputed toy would be taken away) until they could play better together 3) Julie resolved also to talk things through with her sons at a later time, when they were calmer, about how they could get on better together.

PAUSING TO SOLVE PROBLEMS

Family and child problems are commonplace. Good families, even great families all experience problems. All parents are challenged deeply at times by one or more of their children and all parents find themselves reacting in ways or saying things that on reflection, they wish they hadn't. The mark of a healthy family is not whether they have problems or not, but how they respond to the problems they have. Healthy families do not let problems overwhelm them and take active attempts to try and solve and manage them better. Pausing to think through how to respond to problems is generally the first step to solving problems, even quite serious ones. Furthermore, this gives you the satisfaction of taking control of your own reactions and being able to choose a more respectful, and empowering response to what is happening. In later chapters, we will look at how you can use these principles to sit down with your children and/or your partner to solve problems, but even if others are not yet participating, you can decide to take a lead yourself. You can decide that you are going to first pause and think through what way you want to respond.

Consider the following principles to help you think through how you want to respond to problems:

1. Think carefully about what is really going on during the problem.
Is your child looking for attention or is she feeling inadequate? Is it a power struggle between you? Is it caused by your own unrealistic expectations?
Some honest self-reflection is caused for.
2. Focus on your goal and what you want to achieve.
What do you want to happen? What do your children want to happen? How can you get both goals met? For example, your child may want to stay out with friends and you want them to spend more time at home. Perhaps you could get to know some of their friends and arrange for them to come over to your house.
3. Think of what way you want to respond.
Most parents I meet are deeply unhappy when they find themselves reacting angrily or negatively to their children. Even if the problem is not immediately reduced, you are more likely to feel happier in yourself if you respond calmly, respectfully and more patiently.
4. Focus on what you can do.
Rather than waiting for your child to change first, what can you do to help her change or to make the situation better?
5. Remember what has worked with your child in the past.
For example, one parent realised that it was a 'bad time' to harangue his

daughter with questions about how school went the minute she came in from school and was tired, and remembered that a better time was later, after dinner, when everyone was relaxed.

6. If something isn't working, try something different
For example if nagging doesn't work, try backing off and giving your children some space to decide for themselves. Be prepared to have to try out a few different responses or to think about things several times before you find what works for you and your child.

PAUSING FOR A CHANGE – MORE EXAMPLES

Saying No

Jean's five-year-old son would always say 'no' when she asked him to do simple things like tidying up. This would annoy Jean greatly and she would react in an authoritarian manner insisting her son did what she said. Her son would then react angrily and 'dig his heels in' and a long power struggle would take place between them, setting a very bad tone for the rest of the day.

When Jean took some time out to think about what was happening, talking the problem through with a friend of hers, she realised that the battle of wills between them was making things worse. She realised that her young son found it very hard for him to be 'told what to do' and rebelled if she was angry or argumentative in her style of insisting. As a result she decided to 1) to acknowledge his feelings in a respectful way, *without giving in or getting drawn into an argument*, when she had to insist on something being done. For example, she would say 'I know you'd like to stay playing now, but we have to tidy up now for dinner...you'll be able to play later after dinner' 2) she'd give her son choices whenever possible so he could take some control. For example, she might say 'would you like me to help you tidy up?' or 'which game will we tidy away first?'. This respectful co-operative approach helped reduce a lot of the power struggles between them.

Leaving a mess

Peter used to constantly nag his thirteen-year-old daughter not leave her 'stuff all over the house' and to clean her room, which was like a 'pig sty'. The problem continued and it was a constant source of tension between them leading to big public rows about it. When he paused to think about it, Peter realised that while the house being clean was a big issue for him, the most important thing was the relationship with his daughter which was suffering because of the nagging and conflict. As a result he choose a good time to talk the problem through with her. The conversation took place when he was driving her to a class, which worked well as they had privacy and no interruptions. When he listened she told him how much it bothered her that he was on her back all the time and how it hurt her that he criticised her in front of other people. They reached a compromise about the cleaning. She resolved to make sure none of her stuff was in the communal areas of the house and he resolved to back off and let her take responsibility for her room. The arrangement worked reasonably well, and they were able to joke a little about it. But most importantly, the fact they had spoken about it, heard each other's point of view, and come to an agreement, cleared the air and made the most difference and improved their relationship.

Dawdling at homework

James's eight year old son, Tony, would dawdle and delay doing his homework as James sat with him. He would slowly do his writing and pretend he didn't know how to do his sums. James had to 'sit over him' as he did each part of his homework and he became increasingly frustrated as it would take longer and longer, and it really delayed him getting the dinner ready. Often James would end up nagging him and this would eventually lead to a row.

When James paused to think about what was going on, he realised that he had high expectations about his son's abilities, when in fact his son might be struggling with the work. He also realised that sitting over his son and turning homework into a battleground might be further undermining his confidence about what he could do. As a result, James made contact with his Tony's teacher and together they come up with a plan as to how to help his son, which included less but more focused homework and a referral for help from the remedial teacher. James also changed his style of helping Tony at homework. He set aside a fixed homework time during which Tony was to try his best to get everything done. James only sat with James at the beginning and end of homework, ensuring that Tony had a lot of time to try out the work himself. In addition, James became very positive, picking out what Tony had done well rather than what he done wrong. He also focused on helping Tony improve at his own pace. Finally, James made sure that a period of playtime followed homework as a natural reward to Tony for all his work.

All stressed out

Joe worked in a very high-powered job that placed great demands on him. When he came home to his wife and children, he would be frequently pre-occupied and stressed. Often he would be grumpy and snap angrily at his children over minor things. He used to collapse in front of the TV and not even have time to play with them. When he had time away, Joe began to reflect on how out-of-balance his life had become. He realised that his family and children were more important than his work and wanted to be more present for them. As result he began to change his working hours trying to get home earlier. A useful routine he found was to take fifteen minute walk through the park before he went home. During this time to himself, he would unwind and let the stress of the day go. He would prepare himself to arrive home, present and attentive to his children who would be demanding his attention.

NOTHING WORKS ALL THE TIME OR FOR EVERYBODY

I hope reading this book will give you a chance to 'pause' and reflect about your parenting. By taking time to think through what was really going on, you can come up with a respectful response that has a good chance of working. While you can't control how your children will react, what you can do is change your own responses. And what you will find is, that when you can choose respectful and empowering responses taking into account your own and your child's needs (rather than reacting the same way over and over again) you will begin to positively influence your children. In simple terms, your children will begin to change as you begin to change. It is important to remember, however, that nothing works all the time or for everybody or in every situation. For example, in some situations ignoring a child's tantrum can cause too much distress and it can be better to adopt a more soothing or listening approach. What counts is that you take time to think through what works for you and that you are flexible enough to adapt and change if something is not working. You

may have to 'press the pause button' several times before you finally work out how best to manage a problem!

TIPS FOR GOING FORWARD

- 1) Think of a particular problem that occurs in your family. Take some time to think through to understand what is going on and what you might do differently to make a difference.
- 2) Sit down and make a list of your goals. What way do you want to be as a parent, as a couple (if you have a partner), as a family? What is important? Maybe start a discussion with others in the family.

For More information

Positive Parenting: Bringing up responsible, well-behaved and happy children
(Veritas 2008)

Bringing up Responsible Teenagers – a guide to resolving conflict and getting on better with your teenager (Veritas 2001)

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