

About Deborah Hage:

Drawing on 50 years of experience, both as a parent of 14 foster and adopted children and as a reactive attachment disorder therapist, working with emotionally and behaviorally impacted children (resulting from early childhood abuse and neglect), Deborah specializes in coaching parents help their children adjust and heal from past traumas, overcome their fears, and effectively integrate into their new families and environments. As a lecturer, author, therapist and coach, Deborah has helped thousands of families overcome the impacts of past neglect, abuse and other traumas; providing the support and tools they need to create for themselves a happier and more connected life.

The ideas and interventions presented here have not been developed solely by Deborah. She has worked with numerous other therapists and parents over the years, notably Nancy Thomas, whose continued partnership and collaboration she appreciates.

To learn more about Deborah, her practice and her family, please visit deborahhage.com

Parental Fear, Anger and Disappointment

Deborah Hage, MSW

The most natural emotions a parent would feel when their child's behavior does not meet their expectations are fear, anger and disappointment. They come with the job of parenting. Not feeling them might be more outside the norm than feeling them. That deep parental emotions are to be expected allows parents, therapists, caseworkers and family members to accept them, while at the same time not accepting the expression of them. The emotions are normal and cannot be avoided. They are a natural outgrowth of the brain's neurological connections aroused in parents by their child's behavior and cannot be stopped. What can and must be managed is not the feeling of the emotions but how they are expressed. That is, if the goal of the parent response is to affect the child's behavior and emotional states. If it is more important for the parent to vent and spew, doing what comes naturally, responding to their first impulse or makes them feel good at the moment, instead of finding a way to heal their child, then the parent can fire away with both barrels. However, the results will not be pretty.

One of the most common statements parents make to me is, "I can't help it if I get angry. He/She makes me so angry by what he does over and over again I can't stop myself."

This statement is probably true from the parent's perspective, however, if the goal is healing the child it cannot be used as foundational to parenting for a variety of reasons.

1 - Behavior is a non verbal expression of inner processes. This is true for both parents and their children. When someone laughs at an event they are expressing joy. Observers know the person is joyful without the person going into detail verbally about what was so funny. In fact, explaining a visual joke often diminishes it. Negative behavior and emotional states are a non verbal expression of fear. Most children and teens who have traumatized backgrounds do not have an appropriate ability to calmly tell their parent what is going on that is so upsetting. Even if they do talk about what is going on they often blame the wrong precursor to their behavior. An old expression is, "You are never angry at what you think you are." For example the child might say they are angry because they had to take out the

trash, when taking out the trash is just the trigger point. They are really angry that they feel unloved and unsafe due to events that may or may not have passed from conscious memory. They do not trust the parent to be a good boss of them as adults in their past have been abusive or neglectful so will not cooperate. When told to do something by someone they do not trust they react negatively. The parent interprets that as disobedience and the child interprets it as self protection. The parent believes the child is being disrespectful and unappreciative of all the parent is trying to do to create a healthy home environment, making the child's non verbal expression of insecurity out to be about them as parents instead of being about the child's fear.

Children behave the way they behave because they think the way they think. How parents interpret the child's behavior will determine how they will react to the behavior.

What needs to be understood at some point is that fear is the primary emotion. Because fear is difficult to project without it appearing like anger it is misinterpreted as anger. Voices are raised, harsh words are spoken and everyone looks back at the interaction as being angry. In reality, anger has been used to cover up the primary emotion of fear.....fear of being unloved, unlovable. Fear of being hurt physically, verbally and/or emotionally. Fear of being abandoned again. Fear raises its ugly head in the brains of both the parent and child and the situation escalates.

What is true for the child is true for the parent. The parent overreacts emotionally as it is not about the child refusing to take out the trash, that is just the trigger. The parent's reaction is about fear for the child and how they will manage as adults if they cannot follow simple directions. They are afraid of their loss of authority in their own home. Both parent and child miscue the interaction. The child believes the parent's seeming anger (in actuality ...fear) is at him because he is worthless and unlovable. The parent believes the child's anger (actually fear) is at her because she is not an acceptable substitute for the birthmom. The child then gets labeled as "attachment disordered" when what is disordered is the space between the parent and child due to a long series of misinterpreting each other's behaviors.

2 - One of the primary tasks of parents from infancy through adulthood is teaching, modeling and reinforcing emotional regulation and modulation to their children. By being calmly and lovingly responsive in infancy to early cries of distress the parent teaches the child to override cortisol flashes in the brain and create neural pathways of serotonin and endorphins. Every time a parent responds to a child's cry for help in positive ways the child learns to modulate his emotional response for himself, minimizing creating neuronal pathways in his brain that are negatively arousing and maximizing pathways that are calming and soothing. a parent intercedes in the child's negative emotional state with calmness the child learns to mimic the parent's response and block the "flight, fight or freeze" response. When a parent reacts to a child's negative behavior by becoming aroused herself she creates more cortisol in the child's brain and in her own and restricts the possibility that anything said or done by either one will be thoughtful. Cortisol sets up a survival response in the brain of "flight, fight or freeze" and blocks the brain's ability to problem solve. Raised and edgy voices, tense stances and quick movements create the very neural pathways that are counter productive to resolution of differences and creating safe spaces in which the parent and child bond is reinforced.

Additionally, a negative parental arousal pattern sets up a dynamic in which the parent believes the child should be able to control emotional outbursts better than the parent. The parent must model appropriate stress responses in order for the child to learn from the parent how to demonstrate appropriate stress responses. The more aroused a child is the more calm the parent must be. Voices must become softer and movements must be slower if the parent is to have any hope at all of “taming” the wild animal their child appears to be.

3 – The entire premise of “My child makes me so angry” must be challenged as it reflects far more than a figure of speech. Parents are not puppets on a string to their child’s behaviors. A child cannot “make” a parent do anything. Any more than a parent can “make” a child do anything. The parent can set up situations and consequences that encourage a thoughtful child to respond in certain ways but cannot literally “make” a child cooperate. The child can set up circumstances and situations designed to upset the parents, however, whether or not the parent gets upset is up to the parent. The Chinese have a proverb, “The foolish man gets angry, the wise man understands”.

Children behave the way they behave because they think the way they think. How parents interpret the child’s behavior will determine how they will react to the behavior.

In order for parents to get out of the trap of thinking that somehow their child has control of parental emotions is to step back and look at what is driving the child’s behavior. Not what is the child doing, but what is behind the behavior. What thought processes are behind the behavior? Not what is the primary gain, but what is the secondary gain for the behavior? Not what is going to be the immediate consequence imposed by the parents, but what ultimate goal has been accomplished in the mind of the child?

Overcoming and diffusing anger often comes down to changing parental expectations. A great deal of anger is due to the surprise of getting caught off guard by the child. Taking away the element of surprise is very helpful in diffusing a situation before it escalates. If the parent knows the child will be destructive than creating a paradoxical situation first thing in the morning helps both the parent and the child focus on the potential for anger to erupt. Greeting the child as he comes out of his bedroom with, “Oh, good. Today I am going to see what we can do about helping you learn to control your body. What are you going to break today? (Who are you going to hit? What are you going to refuse to do?) I hope you do it quickly as it will give me an opportunity to practice not getting angry and give you an opportunity to gain better control of your body. After you have broken whatever it is you are going to break, do you want to do jumping jacks, frog hops, strong sitting or go to your room? Don’t worry about it now, I will decide when the time comes.”

Change in a child’s behavior ripples out from changes in the parent’s behavior. Low key, thoughtful parental responses demonstrate the parent is in control of himself, the child and the situation. This creates a family environment in which everyone is safer and happier.

Deborah Hage, MSW
www.deborahhage.com