

Three Wise Women

There is a group of parents who suggest topics for these articles and for parenting talks. The following three observations about parenting were raised in a recent brainstorming meeting:

1. We parent best when we are calm.
2. We are most likely to be calm when we can stay in the moment with our children and avoid needlessly reviewing the past or anticipating the future.
3. The hardest times to stay in the moment with our children are when they are either making mistakes (e.g., behavior problems, underperformance in school, being disrespectful or unreliable) or experiencing disappointments (friendship problems, dealing with sadness and loss, a less than perfect day when, for example, they come home from school complaining that school is boring or their teacher hates them, or feeling their own anxiety about their life's circumstances).

One parent laughed and said she parented the best during the smooth times, another said it was only when her children were perfect, and the third said she was at her best when *life was not happening*. How can we learn to control our anxiety so that we can parent calmly at all times, especially during the times of mistakes and disappointments?

Thinking about anxiety and performance in this way, parenting is not so different from sports. Athletes and musicians know that a little anxiety may help with their motivation to practice and even their performance, but too much anxiety impedes performance dramatically. Same with golf and tennis, softball and football, singing and public speaking.

Needless to say, our children need us to be calm when life is happening, including the times their behavior is not perfect and the times when the world is not treating them as well as we wish it would. What better time to address their sense of entitlement than when they are complaining that their teacher hates them or school is boring! They are the center of *our* universe but that does not mean the universe was created for them to be perfectly content and happy every single minute.

Learning to stay calm inside no matter what is happening outside is one of the most important skills parents need to learn. This is discussed in detail in my parenting book, but here is

the basic outline. It starts with an openness to use what is in front of us each day as a springboard to teaching our children something they need to learn.

It might be as simple as using their behavior problem as an opportunity to reassure them that we have already forgiven them for their mistake, even as we pull a privilege or give them a consequence. They see us as calm and forgiving while we discipline. When life itself is hurtful, whether because of a friendship problem or something more serious like a loved one being in a car accident or dealing with a serious medical problem, we view the event as an opportunity to teach about grief and resilience and how *life includes these kinds of times*. We teach them how to deal with unwanted times by how we deal with them. We feel our feelings, seek the support of the people we love, breathe in and out, and continue moving through our day. Children learn how to be calm during the challenging moments of life by watching us. What better motivation can there be?

But we were not all raised in this way. Some of us react emotionally with anger or despair before we have even given ourselves a chance to think things through. One of the women in my planning group told me she stays calm when her children are making mistakes by remembering that the mistakes are most likely due to their age, that the mistakes will not automatically get bigger as the years go by, and that the mistakes might be essential for teaching important lessons. Another said she stays calm during the disappointing times by holding on to her belief that life has always included times of accidents and medical problems and always will. In fact, she reminds herself that no matter how stressful things are today, worse will someday come. What better time for our children to learn to accept unwanted events, to get through such times with a spirit of optimism and inner strength, than for them to experience those times with us while they are still young.

Dr. Steve Kahn is the author of *Insightful Parenting: Making Moments Count*. Please check www.drstevekahn.com for additional (free) articles about parenting or to learn more about the book, available both in paperback and as an audio book. Please feel free to share this article with others.