

# Talking to Your Child After You Yell

Every parent has lost their temper with his or her child. In fact, researchers say there are signs parental yelling is on the rise. Sue Shellenbarger has the latest research on how to avoid blowing up, and mother of two Leigh Fransen shares her story. Photo: AP.

Nearly every parent loses control and screams at the children now and then. But what if you do it repeatedly?

Researchers suspect parents are yelling more. Parents have been conditioned to avoid spanking, so they vent their anger and frustration by shouting instead. Three out of four parents yell, scream or shout at their children or teens about once a month, on average, for misbehaving or making them angry, research shows. Increasingly, therapists and parenting experts are homing in on how it hurts a child, as well as how to stop it.

Raising your voice isn't always bad. Loudly describing a problem can call attention to it without hurting anyone, says Adele Faber, a parenting trainer in Roslyn Heights, N.Y., and co-author of "How to Be the Parent You Always Wanted to Be." For example: "I just mopped the kitchen floor and now it is covered with muddy footprints."

Yelling becomes damaging when it is a personal attack, belittling or blaming a child with statements such as "Why can't you ever remember?" or, "You always get this wrong!" Ms. Faber says.

Many parents lose control because they take children's misbehavior or rebellion personally, research shows: They feel attacked or think the child's actions reflect poorly on them. Parents who see a child's negative emotions as unexpected, overwhelming and upsetting tend to feel more threatened and frustrated with each new outburst, says a study published earlier this month in the *Journal of Family Psychology*. This pattern, called "emotional flooding," triggers a downward spiral in the relationship, disrupting the parent's problem-solving ability and fueling emotional reactions, such as yelling.

Teens whose parents use "harsh verbal discipline" such as shouting or insults are more likely to have behavior problems and depression symptoms, says a recent study of 976

middle-class adolescents and their parents, published online last September and led by Ming-Te Wang, an assistant professor of psychology and education at the University of Pittsburgh.



Many parents lose control because they take children's misbehavior personally. What can help: learning to notice the warning signs in your body, having age-appropriate expectations for your child, and building a margin into daily routines to allow time to deal with mishaps. *Robert Neubecker*

Another study suggests yelling at children may have consequences that go beyond those of spanking. Eight-year-olds whose parents disciplined them by yelling have less satisfying relationships with romantic partners and spouses at age 23, according to a 15-year study led by Stephanie Parade, an assistant professor of psychiatry and human behavior at Brown University. "Parents who yell may miss out on a chance to teach children to regulate their emotions," she says.

Spanking also predicted less satisfying adult relationships, but the negative effects were

offset when parents praised their children at other times. The negative effects of yelling weren't erased by parental warmth, however. The negative problem-solving tactics that children learn when their parents yell may stick with them as adults, says the study, published in 2012 in *Marriage & Family Review*. Children also may expect others to treat them in a negative way, and unconsciously pick partners who fulfill that expectation.

"Yelling is where 90% of us do the most damage," says Julie Ann Barnhill, a speaker and author of *"She's Gonna Blow,"* a book on parental anger that has sold 135,000 copies. Ms. Barnhill says she used to yell one to three times a week at her children when they were preschoolers. She got counseling, and learned to control her anger and discipline her kids in calmer, more positive ways, techniques she now teaches other parents in speeches and workshops.

Parents can learn to notice signs that a blowup is brewing and dial down their own tension. Warning signs can include: tightness in the throat or chest, shallow or rapid breathing, a clenching of the teeth or jaw, negative thoughts about oneself or feelings of being overwhelmed.

Deep breathing, envisioning a pleasant scene, counting to 10 or leaving the room can help. Ms. Barnhill advises practicing calming thoughts, such as "I'm having a miserable day, but getting angry will just make things worse."

Build a margin of spare time into daily routines to allow time for minor mishaps, such as spilled milk or lost jackets, says Jill Savage, author of *"No More Perfect Moms."* She adds, "If I have 20 minutes to clean up after dinner, I'm more likely to handle that spilled milk well."

Learning to start sentences with "I" rather than "you" can help parents shift from an angry attack to a teaching moment, Ms. Faber says. "Say what you don't like, then add what you would like or expect."

Leigh Fransen felt like yelling when her daughters, 10-year-old Alona and 8-year-old Elisha, forgot to feed the family dog, Balto, on two evenings in the same week. "This is a really important responsibility, and they're always asking me for more pets," says Ms.

Fransen, of Fort Mill, S.C. "I wanted to yell, 'You're not getting any dinner tonight, because you didn't feed the dog, and you're going to know how it feels'—which would lead to nothing but tears and misery, and probably to me backing down."

Instead, she started her response with "I," saying, "I don't like seeing the dog not fed. Look at him: He is miserable. I expect him to be fed before you eat your own dinner," Ms. Fransen says. Alona and Elisha needed to be reminded of the deadline twice, but soon learned to remember on their own. Ms. Fransen praised them for taking responsibility and encouraged them to see that "Balto seems much happier now that he's getting dinner on time."



Parents can turn a meltdown into an opportunity to learn by involving kids in finding solutions to the underlying problem. Apologizing can help repair the relationship after an outburst and set a positive example. *Robert*

Many parents blow up because they have unrealistic expectations—such as assuming a two-year-old shouldn't push parental limits, says Ms. Savage, chief executive of Hearts at Home, a Normal, Ill., nonprofit that runs conferences on parenting issues, including discipline. "We say to our children, 'Act your age,' and in reality, they are," she says. Not expecting children to be perfect, or nearly so, can calm parents' frustrations, Ms. Savage says. So can seeing a child's failure as an opportunity for him to learn.

Parents can turn a meltdown into a teaching moment by involving kids in finding solutions, Ms. Faber says. She suggests waiting for a calm moment and stating the rule the child violated. Then give the child a choice about how to prevent the misbehavior from happening again. Inviting a child to suggest solutions teaches problem-solving skills.

Sara Weingot of Baltimore used the technique after her 6-year-old son misbehaved during an outing in her minivan, kicking and pushing two other kids' booster seats. She later told him she never wanted it to happen again, then listened sympathetically as he explained that he had been squeezed too tightly between two other kids' car seats.

Ms. Weingot gave him a choice between staying home with a babysitter next time and finding another solution. He made a list from "get a better car" to taking turns with his siblings in more comfortable seats, an idea that worked, Ms. Weingot says.

Apologizing can help repair a relationship after an outburst, says Ms. Barnhill, the author. She took her daughter aside in her teens and apologized for an explosive incident a few years earlier. "I have this memory of being in your face and yelling at you. I am so sorry, sweet girl," Ms. Barnhill says she told her.

Her daughter Kristen Draughan, who is now 25, married and studying for a master's degree in social work, says she doesn't remember her mother yelling much when she was a child. But Ms. Draughan does recall that her mother's remorse made her burst into tears. "It showed that she cared about my feelings," she says.

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