



This edition of my newsletter focuses on what I have come to see as the single most important variable for effective, positive parenting: managing our own emotions. The good news is that it's something we all control--albeit not without a lot of work. But it's well worth the effort because the payoff is huge. Here's a recent story that illustrates the power of being responsive vs reactive.

"I'M HUNGRY!" shouts 3-year-old, Jolie, every night after her dads, Kyle and Wayne, put her to bed. Their concern that she is not getting enough nutrition, given how little she eats most nights at dinner, wins out. They reluctantly give in, even though they know Jolie "driving the car" is not a good dynamic.

This is reactive parenting—when we get triggered and act on our emotions without thinking through what our children's behavior is telling us and what response is going to teach them positive ways to cope with difficult situations. More often than not, reactivity leads to an escalation of the problem and ultimately more stress and frustration for both parent and child. It is one of the greatest obstacles to parents' ability to be the parent they want to be: in control and able to set and enforce appropriate limits while remaining loving and positively connected to their child.

But it is really hard *not* to be reactive. Parenting is by nature a highly emotional endeavor that stems from our deep love for our children and the accompanying worry for their well-being. The toddler years can be especially challenging given that young children are driven by their emotions and behave in irrational,

maddening and often confusing ways that most parents have no roadmap for navigating.

So, what is the antidote to reactivity? ***Being responsive***, which means taking into consideration what we know about our child, what their behavior is communicating, and what they need from us to help them cope.

This requires mindfulness — the ability to calm our minds and bodies when we get triggered by a challenging behavior so we can *think* about our feelings and reactions and then *choose* a response that we believe (and hope!) will help our children learn positive ways to get their needs met.

What does “responsive” parenting look like in real life?

Taking a step back, Kyle and Wayne, Jolie's dads from our story above, are able to see that what looks and feels like manipulation is actually just Jolie being clever and strategic. (Indeed, Jolie would announce during their breakfast together that when they put her to bed at night, she was going to be very hungry!)

At three, she is all about power and control. Dads say it's bedtime, but not if she can get them to come back and re-engage with her. She is not “misbehaving,” she is clever and strategic. She has sussed out the situation and enacted a plan to reach her goal, admittedly a skill Kyle and Wayne want Jolie to cultivate, knowing it will serve her well as she grows. But it is their job to teach her what strategies are going to be effective.

Accordingly, they make a new plan: they explain very clearly to Jolie that after lights out there is no more interaction or food — it is just time to sleep to build her body and brain. If she calls out after the final goodnight kiss they won't be coming back in. At the same time, they tell her that they will be instituting a small snack (a choice between a cheese stick or apple slices, for example) at book-reading time, which they call “last chance food.” Offering this option was critical to Kyle and Wayne feeling able to implement the new plan: that if she had a chance to eat

something right before bed they would be less anxious and less likely to give in to Jolie's demands after lights out.

How did it work? The first night, as expected, Jolie tested them. She refused the snack at book time, claiming she wasn't hungry, and then proceeded to scream that she was starving five minutes after lights out and kept it up for almost 30 minutes. Kyle and Wayne stood firm but were extremely stressed and uncomfortable. They had to keep reminding themselves that just because Jolie *wants* something doesn't mean she *needs* it, and that clear limits implemented calmly and without anger are in fact quite loving.

They also had to remind themselves that despite Jolie's crying and seeming desperation, they are not hurting her. In fact, they are helping her build resilience as she learns to adapt to very reasonable limits and to cope with not always getting what she wants. This is an attribute they know will serve Jolie well in the future.

On the second night she still refused the snack but protested for only 20 minutes. And on the third night, she ate the snack and went right to sleep. A parenting win!

While not all children adapt this quickly, it is well worth practicing a responsive vs. reactive approach. Responsive parenting enables you to set effective limits with love, without anger or punishment. It prevents those ugly and painful knock-down-drag-out battles that leave everyone feeling miserable and which are much more detrimental to kids (and parents!) than the discomfort children experience while they are learning to adapt to appropriate rules and boundaries. Responsive parenting takes time and patience but has huge payoffs for you and your child in the long-term. It's a marathon, not a race.