

# Carpe Diem – Seize the Day Blog

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Right now, some parents are facing an indefinite length of time that remote learning will take place. Last year, every parent was facing a situation where their child's behavior began to get on your nerves. Your child probably became pretty good at pushing your buttons. In this edition of the Carpe Diem-Seize the Day Blog we will focus on (with the help of Debbie Pincus, MS LMHC), how to get control when your child makes you angry. Let's approach this topic from a proactive and preventative perspective rather than from a reactive frame of reference. Several strategies will be put forth to help ensure that as a parent, you do not let your child's behavior get the best of you.

Why is it so difficult to control our anger with our kids? There are many reasons, but it could be mainly that we allow ourselves to get angry and lose control. When we react emotionally to our kids and lose control, we are allowing our kids to determine how we behave rather than the other way around. Too often, parents react to their kids without thinking. Parents believe they need to get their kids under control immediately, rather than taking a moment to think, "Wait, let me first get myself under control before I respond to my child."

The best way to prevent yourself from losing control is to understand what sets you up and what sets you off and to recognize when you begin to lose control. This is a critical skill for parents to have. Fortunately, it is a skill that parents can learn. When you try to manage your child's behavior instead of your anxiety, what you are saying is, "I'm out of control. I need you to change so that I can feel better."

Here is a secret: when you get yourself under control, your kids will also usually calm down. I want you to remember a couple of things when managing your child's behavior. Conflict is inevitable but combat is optional. Calm is contagious and so is anxiety. It has been proven that a parent's anxiety about their child contributes significantly to the anxiety of their child. Think of it this way: if you cannot get calm and in control then you are creating the exact atmosphere you are trying to avoid.

Here is an example. Let's say you are teaching your child how to ride a bike. Your child is not getting it and is being whiny and cranky and talks back to you. Your emotions are a combination of frustrated, annoyed, angry, and disappointed. You somehow feel responsible to teach him how to ride this bike, and he just will not cooperate. Then you yell at your child, and your child continues to struggle. Then it gets worse because he is so anxious that he cannot concentrate. He is feeling pushed to do something and he reacts to it by failing. When this happens, instead of snapping and reacting, just ask yourself, "How do I stay calm so that I can be helpful for my child to get to where he needs to be?"

Remind yourself that you are not responsible to get him to ride the bike, you are responsible to stay calm and provide guidance. From there, you can think about the most effective way to help him learn. In the end, if we lose control and get angry then we create the failure that we are trying to avoid.

When we lose control and get angry in front of our kids, what we are communicating is “There are no grown-ups at home.” We are saying that we cannot manage our anxiety. And when you try to manage your child’s behavior instead of your anxiety, what you are saying is, “I’m out of control. I need you to change so that I can feel better.”

No one wants to lose control and get angry, and we don’t do it on purpose. However, it just seems to happen. Fortunately, there are things you can do to train yourself to stay calm. Below are several techniques to control your anger and stay calm when dealing with your child.

### **Make a Commitment To Stay in Control**

Commit yourself to try to stay in control from now on. Notice what sets you off—is it your child ignoring you? Or does backtalk drive you up the wall? It is not always easy to stay in control and no one can control their temper 100 percent of the time. Nevertheless, commit to be calm and work toward that goal.

Usually, the first thing is to just commit yourself to not saying anything, to not reacting at all when the feeling of anger towards your child arises. Give yourself a moment to do whatever it is you need to do to get calmer. You might walk out of the room or go into the bedroom or bathroom. The key takeaway here is that you leave the situation temporarily. Remember, there is nothing wrong with disconnecting. You do not have to react to your child.

### **Expect Your Child To Push Your Buttons**

We get upset when our kids don’t do what we want them to do. They do not listen, or they don’t comply. I think the best solution is to expect and accept that your child is going to push your buttons and to not take it personally. In a sense, your child is doing her job—she is testing her limits. Likewise, it is your job to remain calm and make sure that your child knows where the limits are and, when she exceeds those limits, that she is held accountable.

### **Know What You Are and Are NOT Responsible For as a Parent**

Some parents are confused about what they are and are not responsible for. And when they take responsibility for things that belong to their child, they inevitably get frustrated. Stay aware of what belongs to you and what belongs to your child. In other words, what belongs in your box and what belongs in your child’s box.

A box has boundaries, and it has personal space within those boundaries. In your box are your thoughts, feelings, and responsibilities. In your child’s box are his thoughts, feelings, and responsibilities. Once you know whose box is whose then parents should stay in their own box and stay out of their child’s box. This does not mean you do not parent; it just means you influence your child, but you do not control him.

Your child has responsibilities that he needs to meet in life. Those are in his box. Those belong to your child, not you. If you always think you are responsible for how things turn out, then you are going to be in your child's way and that is going to create more stress and anxiety. A parent who successfully stays out of her child's box would say the following to her child:

"I'm responsible for helping you figure out how to solve the problem. But I'm not responsible for solving the problem for you."

If you feel like you are responsible for solving your child's problems, then he is not going to feel like he must solve them himself. You are going to become more and more agitated and try harder and harder. And the more you try, the less your child tries. It is counterproductive.

Parents do have responsibilities. Parents should coach their child when necessary. And parents should set the rules of the family and hold their kids accountable for those rules by giving them effective consequences. The rest is up to the child.

### **Don't Worry About the Future**

Sometimes, we fast forward to the future and wonder if this is how our kids will be the rest of their lives. We wonder how they will make it in the real world if they will not even do their homework. The more we think about their future, the more our anxiety goes up. In our heads, we start worrying that we are not doing a good job as parents. We worry that we do not know what to do to get them under our control.

Psychologists have a term called thinking errors. Thinking errors are the thoughts we have in our head that do not match reality and are usually negative and self-defeating. One of those thinking errors is our natural tendency to assume the worst possible outcome for a given situation. In reality, things rarely turn out as bad as we imagined. It seems our brains just love to scare us.

Therefore, stay in your box and focus on what you can do in the present. The future is up to your child and you do not have control over it no matter how hard you try. And if you do try, your anxiety just goes up and things get worse for both of you.

### **Prepare for Your Anxiety**

Notice what triggers your anxiety and try to prepare for it. You might observe that every day at five o'clock, your family's nerves are on edge. Everyone is home from work or school, they are hungry, and they are decompressing. Ask yourself: "How am I going to handle this when I know my teen is going to come screaming at me? What do I do when she asks to use the car when she knows I'm going to say no?" Prepare yourself now for the conflict that you know is coming.

Say to yourself: "This time, I'm not getting into an argument with her. Nobody can make me do that. I'm not giving her permission to push my buttons."

Your stance should be, "No matter how hard you try to drag me into an argument, it's not going to happen."

Let yourself be guided by the way you want to see yourself as a parent instead of by your feelings.

### **Use Positive Self-Talk**

Talk to yourself. Yes, talk to yourself. In your head, you can say something like, “I’m not going to react to my child’s behavior. I am going to step back. I’m going to take a deep breath.” Self-talk may seem hokey, but it is a powerful tool. You can control the voice in your head so that it produces calm instead of anxiety.

Ask yourself “What’s helped me in the past?” Start thinking about what’s helped you to manage your anxiety in the past. What’s helped to soothe you through something that makes you uncomfortable? Say something to yourself every time you feel your emotions rising. It can be anything from “Stop” or “Breathe” or “Slow down” to “Does it really matter?” or “Is this that important?” Experiment and use the words that help you stay in control.

Keep a mental picture handy to calm yourself down. Think of a beautiful place that you love that always relaxes you. Visualizing that place ahead of time will increase your ability to go there more automatically when you feel yourself becoming angry with your child.

### **Take a Deep Breath**

Take a deep breath when you feel yourself escalating—and take a moment to think things through. There is a big difference between responding and reacting. When you respond, you are taking some time to think about what you want to say. In contrast, when you react, you are just on autopilot. It is all knee-jerk. As much as possible, you want to respond thoughtfully to what your child is saying or doing. Make sure that you take that deep breath before you respond to your child because that extra moment will give you a chance to think about what you want to say.

Sometimes, to keep a pot from boiling over, you just have to take the lid off for a few seconds to let it breathe.

### **Visualize a Positive Relationship with Your Child**

Picture your ideal relationship with your child five or ten years from now. Ask yourself, “Is how I’m responding to my child now going to help me have the relationship that I want? Is my response going to help me reach my goal?” This does not mean that you give in to your child’s demands or tolerate your child’s inappropriate behavior. Instead, it means that you treat your child with respect—the way you want her to treat you. It means that you talk to your child the way you would want your child to talk to you. Always keep the picture of the ideal relationship in your head. Make that picture the goal. Ask yourself, “Will my angry response be worth it?” If your goal is to have a solid relationship with your child, will your reaction get you closer to that goal?

Remember, when your child is aggravating you, your thinking process at that moment is very important. The goal is to be as objective as we can about our behavior and our child’s behavior. Ask, “What’s my kid doing right now? What is he trying to do? Is he reacting to tension in the house?”

You do not have to get her to listen, but you do have to understand what is going on—and figure out how you are going to respond to what is going on. Then you can stay on track and not give in to angry impulses that are counterproductive. The thinking process itself helps us to calm down. As parents, what we are working toward is “What’s within my power to do to get myself calm?”

The less we can react, the better. And the more we think things through, the more positive the outcome will be. That is the crux of what we are talking about here: responding thoughtfully rather than simply reacting.

Someone once said, “Response comes from the word responsibility.” In that sense, managing our anger is taking responsibility for how we want to act rather than having a knee-jerk reaction when our buttons are pushed. Once we let our anger take over, we leave our logical brain and begin thinking with our emotional brain, and that is never a good idea.

And if we can get our thinking out in front of our emotions, we are going to do better as parents. That is the goal.

***Editor’s Note: The Carpe Diem – Seize the Day Blog will be distributed and posted weekly.***  
Always remember – **CARPE DIEM – SEIZE THE DAY!**

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