



# 5 STEPS TO BECOMING A LESS REACTIVE PARENT

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## DO YOU REACT OR RESPOND?

When our little angels find our triggers!  
And they all do, how do we behave?  
Here's 5 steps that can help you  
become a less reactive parent and  
respond in a much calmer (and more  
effective) way.

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## 5 STEPS TO BECOME A LESS REACTIVE PARENT

1. ***Taking responsibility for your own emotions*** – How often do you use the phrase “you’re making me so angry!”? I know I’ve used it a few times before I learned that I was ultimately responsible for my emotions and how I choose to express them. That’s not to say that certain behaviours of others can’t trigger us, and as adults I do believe it’s important to respect other people’s triggers when we’re aware of them.

We can become “triggered” when someone’s words or actions clash with our values, trigger a traumatic memory or reflect something within us that we don’t like about ourselves. Our children are like a mirror image of their environment and will reflect our emotions and behaviours.

Instead of using the term “you’re making me angry”, try replacing it with “I’m feeling angry”. This owns the emotion and it teaches your children how to do the same rather than blaming external issues that they cannot control, we can role model owning the emotion as well as how we resolve the emotion, after all, there’s nothing wrong with feeling angry sometimes, it’s how we behave and how we process the anger that is important. That leads us to my second point.

2. ***Role model how we can manage our emotions in a healthy way*** – All of our emotions are okay, and even necessary. Some feel nicer than others and most of us aim to be in a positive state more often than not. Feeling sad, or scared, or angry are how our body and mind process certain experiences and these emotions are a crucial part of the process. We can often hide our emotions from our children for fear of upsetting them or appearing weak, and sometimes we even tell our children to hide theirs....”come on, it’s ok, stop crying”, “don’t you dare yell at.....”, “cheer up”. These common phrases can seem harmless on the surface and almost every parent has used at least one of these at some stage....I’m guilty of all 3.

What do these comments do? They minimize their emotions and fail to acknowledge their feelings. What they are upset or angry about may seem trivial to us, after all, if we spill our drink, we clean it up and move on, why can’t they just suck it up? There’s a part of our brain that has yet to develop (in fact, it’s not fully developed until our mid 20’s on average) that controls our ability to evaluate a situation and react/respond accordingly.

3. ***Learn to understand and validate their emotions*** - Another approach we could take might sound like “I can see this has really upset you, can I do anything to help you feel better?”, “It sounds like you’re very angry right now, how about we walk away for a minute and take some deep breaths (do it with them if it’s new) and then we can talk about what happened” or “would you like to talk about what’s upsetting you? I’m here if you’d like a shoulder to cry on”.

If we acknowledge their emotions, then we validate them and begin the lessons in how to process emotions rather than bury them (burying emotions can lead to emotional outbursts – talk about a chain reaction huh!). acknowledge, validate and process.

When you feel yourself getting angry or sad (yucky feeling emotions), name them and show how to process them in a healthy way, if this is new to you and you don't know how to do this just yet, then seek support, this will help your whole family. By saying “I feel angry” and taking some deep breaths, telling your child you're giving yourself some time-out (I'm anti time-outs in the, forced and isolated form), then pick up a book or turn on some music and continue with breathing exercises. When you feel calmer, explain how this helped you feel better.

4. ***Express your emotions*** - If you're sad, it's ok to cry (this goes for dads too), if your children see you cry, this gives them permission to cry as well, it normalizes the emotions, and a good cry can be so therapeutic. I wouldn't recommend deep diving in to your feelings and thoughts with your children, they are not your therapist, however they do look to you for how you process your own stuff.

By expressing your own emotions, not only do we give a good example to our children, we also help to avoid the bottle up and explode pattern, we're not supposed to hold on to emotions, we need to process them. Sometimes that can take time, but if we don't allow them, we push them down, and well, what's your boiling point? Emotions are energy in motion, processed and allowed to flow is natural, blocked and pushed down causes not only emotional pain, but can also have physical consequences (but that's another post for another day).

5. ***Learn to go with the flow (a little planning helps)*** - You know those mornings where you feel nothing is going right? You wake up and your child stares at their breakfast claiming they're not hungry, you insist they eat it as breakfast is the most important meal of the day (insert frustration building), then the getting teeth brushed and clothes on quickly so we can make it to school and work on time, this too is met with resistance and the frustration boils over and before you know it, everyone is yelling.

Did you spot the triggers? You woke up with a deadline that you knew was going to be a challenge, you had an expectation for kids to eat their breakfast when they quite possibly didn't have an appetite for eating yet and then the yelling began and you wanted the kids to just do as they were told so this flawed plan to go smoothly.

A few small changes could turn this situation around. Understanding why this happens is the best way to move forward and make the changes to create a scenario where you can be less reactive.

We can't be prepared for everything that might be thrown our way, but there are some things we can help go a little smoother. If we can get up a little earlier ourselves and start the day with a cuppa in peace, some meditation or yoga, or perhaps a few pages of that book you never seem to find time for. Sort out clothes and lunches as much as possible the night before, so you're not searching for that one elusive shoe in the morning. Have a chat with your children about why they don't eat breakfast, perhaps more time, less stress, something different or even something they can

eat/drink in the car could work. Perhaps they'll surprise you and come up with something that will make mornings a little easier.

When we have a few simple things in place, we can be in a calmer place for when the unexpected does happen, and you know it will. When a big cup of milk gets spilled across the table and it's dripping on to the floor. When everything else is in chaos, this provokes the boiling point and we have little chance of coping, but when we have taken some of the obstacles we can control out of the way, challenges like this can be faced with a light hearted, "get the paper towel" command to the troops, with a giggle and some little helpers, it's cleaned up in no time, and they probably enjoyed helping, because you made it fun and didn't lose your s@\*t!