

Take a Deep Breath: The Children are Listening

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Children begin their lives constantly observing and emulating our use of language. A baby watches, listens and models her mother's face saying "Ohhhh," moving her own lips to form the shape of that sound. A toddler in his car seat repeats the word his parent blurted out when cut off suddenly in traffic, usually to the great chagrin of the parent. My 5-year-old granddaughter cocks her head seriously and says, "Well, actually, the most interesting thing is....." just the way her mom does.

Knowing they are listening, seeking to understand, and emulating how we talk, adults must be mindful of what we say and how we say it in the presence of children. This may be especially important during the life crisis of a divorce, when children are already feeling vulnerable and anxious. Similar to being cut off suddenly in traffic, negative emotions during a divorce can quickly heighten, along with the risk of blurting out words one will later regret. When under stress, the guard rails filtering words can become wobbly or fall off altogether.

It's not just angry, sarcastic, insulting words that children internalize, it is also the meaning of those words in the context of relationships. Children are deeply hurt and frightened when parents fight with each other, and not infrequently, will beg them to stop. What does it mean to them that the two most important adults in their lives are attacking each other this way?

We live in an era when disrespect, insulting and belittling words and verbal abuse are regularly tweeted out in all caps. Sadly, this has the effect of normalizing unfiltered language. This is hard enough to manage as an adult but giving vent to verbal rage will never be anything but damaging to a child. So, what can parents do if they feel triggered? They need to slow it down.

Two simple techniques to help create more mental and emotional space under stress are:

1. Mindful breathing: taking at least four deep, slow belly breaths before responding; and
2. Softening your eyes: focusing on relaxing the muscles around your eyes so they fall back into their sockets.

Both techniques will relax tension in your body, which helps to clear your head, strengthen your guardrails, and give you time to respond rather than react. If this can create more emotional safety for your children, it is well worth the effort.



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