Empoering Parents Logo

**Parenting Resolutions: Your 4-Step Plan to Calm, Positive Parenting *by Debbie Pincus MS LMHC***

The new year gives us a chance to pause and ask ourselves the big questions:  “How am I doing? How can I improve?” If you’re a parent, perhaps you resolve to be a calmer one, a more consistent one, a stricter one, a more involved one. Maybe you’re thinking about the gap between the parent you are and the parent you want to be. Here are four steps for you to effect positive change in your family this year. Many of them are simple to put into place, but create change that will last for a lifetime.

*When you know how to stay separate from your child and not get into his box, you will find yourself making fewer resolutions about staying calm, worrying less, and keeping your cool, because those things will naturally occur.*

**Step one:** **Self-reflection.** Self-reflection is key to all good relationships, including those with your kids. And the beginning of a new year is a great time to resolve to make any necessary changes. Resolutions first require some thoughtful self-reflection. Here are some important New Year’s questions to ask yourself which will help you reflect and formulate your own resolutions.

* Do I lose it with my kids? Is my losing it more about my own sense of helplessness or lack of effectiveness, tolerance or patience?
* What are [**my temper “buttons”**](http://www.empoweringparents.com/How-to-Keep-Cool-When-the-Kids-Push-Your-Buttons.php) with my kids? What do those triggers say about me?
* What can and can’t I expect of myself as a parent? What are—and aren’t—my responsibilities?
* Do I do for my kids what they can already do for themselves? Am I over-functioning? (And is that why they are under-functioning?)
* How is my behavior contributing to any problems that I see in my kids? Is there anything I’m doing that might contribute to their misbehaving or their not listening?
* Are there things that I nag or criticize my child for that I need to improve on myself?
* Is being with me a good feeling or do I spend most of my time criticizing, correcting and being negative?
* Would I like to have myself as a parent? What would be positive and what would be most difficult?
* Do I carry enough compassion for myself when I’m parenting? If not, what can I do to develop more of that for myself?

**Step two: Calm is contagious.** A common resolution parents make at New Year’s (and all through the year) is to yell less and be less reactive. Staying calm with your kids is one of the best things you can do to model behavior and build positive relationships. Remember, anxiety is contagious—and so is calm. Here are five tips to keep help you keep your cool this year so you can stick to your resolutions:

* **Realize what you have control over.** Recognize you have control over your response to your child’s actions, not over the decisions he makes. Give yourself the time to breathe, get the adrenaline down so you can get the thinking part of your brain engaged. Before you respond, spend time thinking about the most effective way to respond to your child’s behavior. Make sure you’re calm when you speak to him about his behavior, and the consequences you might be giving him.
* **Work on your triggers.** Try to be aware of some of your beliefs that trigger your anger with your kids. Although you will hold your kids accountable for inappropriate behavior, also recognize that much of their behavior is just kids being kids. Don’t be mad at them for going through their natural developmental stages. Young kids have lots of energy and often use it to get into everything in sight. This is necessary and healthy for kids, as aggravating as it is for us. Older kids explore the boundaries and take risks in order to individuate from their parents—another necessary step in their development, although it is scary, worrisome and aggravating for parents to witness.
* **Practice good self-care.** Do what you can to calm and soothe yourself. Get enough rest, take care of your health, work on your adult relationships, pursue your goals and interests. The more you care for yourself, the more resilience you will have and the more your children will not have to emotionally fulfill you.
* **“Name that stressor!”** Manage your distress by acknowledging it and naming it. You can say something like, “I’m feeling annoyed right now. I’m going to take my own timeout, breathe, and think about how I want to address this problem.” By doing this, you will be calming yourself down and modeling for your children how to better regulate themselves.
* **Look at the big picture.** Remind yourself that the most influence you will have with your children is in building a positive relationship with them. All of our interactions create a relationship over time. Think about how you want this relationship to look in five years, ten years, twenty years. In the moment, try asking yourself, “What can I do now, in this interaction, to hold my child accountable and develop a positive relationship?”

**Step three: Sticking with the plan.** You might be saying to yourself, “Okay, now that I have my resolutions, how can I keep them all year and make them a habit?” Here are three important things you can do to make sure they stick:

* **Make a commitment to change.** The only way for you to follow through on a resolution is to first decide that you will. When you realize your decision to do something differently has meaning, importance or value to you, it gives you the motivation and power to keep going. Only then can it become the commitment and priority that it needs to be.
* **Work on yourself.** When you make this commitment, you’ll also to recognize how important working on yourself—rather than on your kids—is to creating great and lasting relationships with them. And of course remind yourself that your improvements will be helping your kids grow to be self-reliant, caring adults.
* **Do whatever it takes.** Put up reminders on your bathroom mirror. Ask your mate to gently remind you about your commitments. Come up with a code word or signal. Do whatever it takes to keep your commitment to changing.

**Step four: Positive Parenting:**

* **2 positive interactions for every negative comment.** For every reprimanded correction, criticism you give your children, (a necessary part of parenting), add two positive interactions. They can come in the form of a hug, a compliment, acknowledgement of something well done, a smile, or having a fun time together. Remember, the brain remembers negatives very well, but has a much harder time holding onto the positives. That’s why you need to make a conscious effort to include two positives for every one negative.
* **Ask, don’t tell.** Make a conscious effort to ask, not tell, when your child shares something with you—particularly your teen. “It is so unfair that the teacher did not give us more time for the research paper.” Your response: “Is there something you want to do about that?” Versus: “You should speak to the teacher about it.”
* **Be separate from your child.** The best gift you can give your children is being a parent who knows separateness. When you know how to stay separate and not get into your child’s box, you will find yourself making fewer resolutions about staying calm, nagging, worrying less, and keeping your cool, because those things will naturally occur. When you are separate, you will naturally allow your child to own his life. They will be *his* disappointments, *his* frustrations, *his* mistakes, *his* struggles; you will acknowledge this without getting into his head or letting your worry get in his way. You will know these are problems for him to own, not for you to own. It will be clear what belongs in your box and what does not. Look at it this way: You have your own disappointments and struggles and goals to work out. You can be there as your child’s guide and leader—not  the owner of his life. The way to be truly connected to your children is to be truly separate from them.