

Counselor Chat

A resource for Mann Parents, from your School Counselor,
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Keeping your Calm in Parenting

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Anyone notice that fall can be a stressful time? As the leaves change to all their glory, so do our schedules. From the relaxed days of summer fun and vacations to early morning wake ups for school, soccer games and practice, music lessons and volunteering in the classroom. On top of this is the yearly financial drain too. Every time I turn around my kids need another check for school pictures, piano lessons, Time for Kids etc. On top of all that we have shorter days with more darkness and often more clouds and rain. I notice my patience being shortened as I repeatedly check the calendar to make sure I haven't missed my sign up for soccer snack or left a child waiting at piano lessons. I find that I'm quick to lash out at my kids and don't find many moments to connect, play and laugh with them.

Perhaps it's time that we all take a break, breathe deeply, count to ten and do something nice for ourselves.

Recently, I watched the PBS program The Secret Life of the Brain (2000) and was reminded that we are "emotional machines that think". Our emotions have a physical place in the brain and each emotion has a neuron circuitry that has evolved over millions of years. And could it be that when life gets stressful this emotional machine of ours takes over the thinking rational part of us. Perhaps it does. In their book, Parenting from the Inside Out, (Penguin, 2003) authors Daniel Siegel and Mary Hartzell help explain what goes on in our brain when our emotions take over and we "lose it".

Their model is called "Brain in the Palm of the Hand". To imitate this model, make a fist with your hand. Put your thumb inside your four fingers and pretend that this is your brain. Your four fingers represent the prefrontal cortex of your brain; the thinking, rational part of your brain. Underneath your fingers is your thumb. This is the amygdala or the threat and fear part of the brain also known as fight or flight. Now pretend that your brain has "flipped its lid". Throw back your fingers and there is the fight or flight part of our brain, right where your thumb is. When we have flipped our lid, we can no longer access the rational, thinking part of our brain. We want to yell, dominate and have power over, or we want to retreat and run away from what is going on. In this state, we cannot rationally discuss with another, hear another person's reasoning or find cognitive solutions to the problem. When teaching children "Brain in the Palm of the Hand", I often refer to this as "dinosaur brain", a descriptive metaphor...Can you relate?

Ever notice that when you flip our lid, others around you flip their lid too? First it's you, then it's your child and then it's your spouse who just walked in the door after work. Now we have a whole family of flipped lids where no rational cognitive thinking is going on. This imitation and reaction to flipped lids is partly due to the mirror neurons in our brain. If I yawn, someone else may unconsciously yawn. If I stick out my tongue at an infant, he or she will do the same. If I flip my lid, my kids might do the same.

Flipping our lid is uncomfortable. It is often followed up by feelings of guilt and remorse. As parents we don't want to lose it with our children. We would certainly prefer to remain calm and maintain our rational, thinking part of our brain. Following are some ideas that might help you have fewer moments of losing it and more opportunities to find your calm in parenting.

Share the "Brain in the Palm of your Hand" with your children. Have them make a fist and tell them about what their brain is doing when they "lose it". Let the "flipped lid" be a hand signal you each can use to warn others that you're about to flip your lid, or to give a silent signal to each other that it might be time to take a break.

Take a break! When you feel your emotional temperature rising, take a break. Count to ten, breathe deeply, or call a friend. Give your kids the "flipped lid signal", tell them you need to take a break and remove yourself from the situation. If you learn to take a break when feeling upset, guess what your kids will learn to do when they are upset? Modeling is very powerful when it comes to flipping your lid or keeping your cool.

Be gentle on yourself. We are human, we are emotional machines. Allow for mistakes and moments of losing it. Afterwards ask yourself what you learned and make amends where necessary. Allow your children to make

mistakes too...and when everyone has cooled down, ask them what they learned and what kind of repair or amends they need to make. Don't force apologies. Forced apologies become shallow and insincere.

Remember the three "R's" of making a mistake. Do this after everyone has cooled down. Recognize: "Whoops I made a mistake, I yelled at you." Reconcile: "I apologize, this is not how I want to handle conflicts". Resolve: "Let's work on a solution together for the next time we disagree".

Respond rather than react: Make this your goal. To move to a place where you can emotionally detach and respond to the situation, with your rational thinking brain instead of reacting with your flight or fight brain. Use emotional honesty. When upset share your feelings. "I feel very discouraged and challenged when I ask you to help clear the table and you leave to watch TV."

Practice good self care: Schedule breaks in your day where you call a friend, take a walk, do yoga or enjoy a cup of tea. Date nights and moms' night out are all important. Just like on the airplane, put on your own oxygen mask before putting on your child's. And if we want our kids to have good self care....who are they going to learn it from? There's that modeling piece again!

When life gets unusually stressful, practice increased self care. If life is getting too unmanageable and you and your family are stressed by your increasing reactions, seek the help of a professional.

News from the Counseling Office:

Lunch Time Groups for 4-6th grade students: I will once again be offering lunch time counseling groups for students in grades four thru six. This is a drop in group that will be available throughout the school year. Topics tend to be around friendships, making and keeping friends, how to resolve conflicts etc. Watch for permission slips in backpacks.

Other Available Groups: Changing Family Groups (Banana Splits) and Friendship Groups will begin after fall conferences. If your child could benefit from participating in a group, please contact me at 425.881.9696 or mmiller@verizon.net

Kelso the Problem Solving Frog: Kelso will once again be visiting the Kindergarten and First Grade classrooms to talk about conflict and how to resolve friendship issues. Letters will be coming home telling more about this program.

If you're struggling financially and resources are slim for the holidays, please contact me at mmiller@lwsd.org or 425.881.9696. Support is available.

Resources for Parents:

Parenting from The Heart; How to Discipline with Kindness and Firmness: Positive Discipline is back at Horace Mann! *Tired of the whining, sibling conflict, morning routines, attitude, homework not getting done or something else?* Join us for "**Parenting from the Heart; How to Discipline with Kindness and Firmness**, an introductory class to find out **how to raise children who are responsible, resilient and can think for themselves**. Kind and Firm parenting can bring peace to your home and a sense of accomplishment to your parenting. Tuesday, November 10th 7:00-8:30 in the Horace Mann library. To reserve a seat, contact Melanie Miller, Mann School Counselor at mmiller@lwsd.org or 425-881-9696.

Are you a parent of a child with special needs? Lake Washington PTSA has a monthly parent meeting for all parents of children with special needs. Meetings often include an informative and worthwhile speaker. For more information go to: <http://www.lwsd.org/Parents/Special-Education/Pages/default.aspx> or e-mail Chairperson, Beth Angelo at 4Bangelo3@verizon.net

Parenting Class calendar: Visit www.pasadler.org/calendar.pdf for a complete listing of parenting classes throughout the Puget Sound Area. Calendar provided by the Puget Sound Adlerian Society.