When Your Kids Drive You Crazy

HOW TO HANDLE YOUR TOP PARENTING STRUGGLES

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Introduction

Everywhere you turn, someone's there to tell you how you suck as a parent.

Whether it's a news article saying research shows that screen time before the age of two means your child will grow up to be a 26-year-old couch potato who can't hold down a job – or a mother-in-law who's watching your kids turn up their noses at dinner and pointing out that when **her** kids were young, they were grateful for food on the table and finished every last bite without a battle.

Enough.

We parents are all doing the best we can with the tools and patience we have at the moment.

Don't expect this book to make you feel like a horrible parent. Expect the **opposite**.

Reading this book will give you more tools in your parenting toolbox to deal with the tough days.

You know those days.

When after the third tantrum in the span of 15 minutes, you think you might literally scream and you have to consciously will your feet not to run out the front door.

When you can barely keep your eyes open, but the baby just will **not** sleep.

When you daydream of installing padded walls on one room in your house so you can lock the kids in there and sit down on the couch and just do nothing and hear nothing and have nothing pulling, tugging, or hanging on you for one minute out of your day.

On those days, maybe you question why you had kids in the first place. Maybe you call your best friend to commiserate. Maybe you cry.

We've **all** been there.

For those days, keep a copy of this book open on your computer. Save a copy to your tablet or phone. Print out a page you find helpful and put it on your fridge.

In this book, you'll find research-proven techniques for handling your toughest parenting days. From tantrums to whining to pouting – this book has the answers you need.

You are **already** a great parent.

This book will just help you amplify your greatness with some fresh, tried-and-true ideas.

HOW THIS BOOK IS DIFFERENT

Most parenting books revolve around one person's experience with their own kids or the kids they work with.

I'm all for learning from what's worked for others, but on the other hand not too many years ago, parents gave their babies whiskey to help with teething.

Thanks to science, we now know that certain things aren't great for kids.

Smoking while pregnant, giving babies alcohol, letting kids ride in the backseat with no seat belt.

Just because it worked before doesn't mean it's something to **continue** doing.

In this book, I will share some of my own experiences. But for every tough situation, my goal is to provide you with research-backed advice you can add to your parenting toolbox.

Not my idea of what you should do. Not advice from one parenting "expert" whose kids became adults 20 years ago.

This book will give you **proven**, positive tips for how to handle your top parenting struggles.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

You do not have to read this book cover to cover.

Each chapter corresponds to a tough parenting situation. Feel free to jump around and read chapters as you need them.

Now, to be clear: Not every idea in this book will work with every child.

Every kid (and every parent) is different.

Read through the ideas, and make a mental note of what you think might work for you and your family.

Just remember: It never hurts to try something new once. That's what we tell our kids about trying new foods, right?

The same is true for us as parents. You may read an idea for how to handle a temper tantrum, and you may think to yourself, "That's ridiculous! That would never work."

And you may very well be right. You know your child best.

But if you are really struggling with a certain behavior, and you are at your wit's end, what does it hurt to try something new and see how it goes?

And now I'm going to suggest something a little weird.

In most of those tough parenting moments, our own emotions as parents can get in the way of handling the issue calmly and peacefully.

We are only human.

This is why I recommend practicing your new tricks ahead of time – before you're in that challenging parenting moment.

You can practice on your spouse or partner. You can practice on the dog. You might even be able to practice with your kids.

HERE'S WHAT I MEAN

Go up to your spouse and say: "Honey, I've really been struggling with Junior when he whines lately. I lose my temper, and I'd like to try some new ways to help him learn not to whine."

"Okay," your honey will say.

"Great! You pretend to be Junior and say something whiny."

Then when your spouse obliges, you can practice your new techniques.

ONE LAST THING

If you try something and it works, let me know. If you try something and it bombs, let me know that, too.

Email me at kelly@idealistmom.com to share what's worked and what hasn't, and I'll take your experiences into consideration for the next edition of this book.

Because this parenting gig? We're all in it together.

Chapter 1: 7 Ways to Stop Your Kid From Whining

When my daughter Abby was four years old, she had a tendency to whine. A lot.

She's a good kid and was awfully mature for being just four years old. But when she wanted something or felt wronged in some way, her voice veered into nasal territory. She wants to watch another movie, she wants to wear her tutu to bed, she wants to open the garage herself, she doesn't **need** to go to the bathroom, you didn't give her the right password to get out the door in the morning when you're *already* running late – and she didn't actually tell you what the right password is.

First, I tried saying this when the whining started: "I'm sorry, I can't understand what you're saying. Try saying it in a different way."

Usually, she could right her tone on the first try, but on a tough day it took two or three times to extinguish the whiny pitch.

She was still whining just as much. The only difference was that now she could reframe her request in a different tone.

A FRESH START

When we moved from an apartment into a home that summer, my husband (then fiancé) and I added **another** anti-whining technique to our repertoire – we told Abby that whining wasn't allowed at the new house.

But instead of being nags about it, we enlisted her help: "We'll have to let people know when they come to visit that there's no whining in our house! Can you help with that?"

Like most people, she digs the idea of telling people off for doing something that she does herself.

Then I came across a poster on Pinterest that said this:

No Whining

No Complaining

Absolutely No Frowning

Only Hugs, Smiles, and

Warm, Fuzzy Feelings Are Allowed

Thank You

I showed the poster to Abby and read it out loud to her. SHE LOVED IT.

Her idea? Hang up the sign in our new house so people know there's no whining allowed.

So we did.

And again, the sign helped some. But not enough.

CONFESSION TIME

On occasion, I've displayed **zero** capability of patience and understanding by:

- Snapping back with: "Well, you can't always get what you want." (Made the whining worse.)
- Responding in a mocking whiny tone. (I felt like crap after.)
- Ignoring her and hoping she'll stop. (Didn't work.)

I went in search of some new tricks to have at my disposal.

7 TIPS FROM THE EXPERTS ON DEALING WITH WHINY KIDS

Here are a few tips I culled from various parenting sites:

1. Nip it in the bud. Sometimes kids whine because they feel like we don't hear them.

I know when I'm busy with something else, I have a tendency to ignore Abby's more polite requests. It's when she gets frustrated and repeats her request in a whiny tone that I lose my patience and finally respond.

On webmd.com, pediatrician Laurel Schultz, MD, recommends that you do not wait until your child is frustrated to acknowledge him. If your child tends to whine when you're on the phone or in the middle of a conversation, come up with a system for letting him know you'll be with him in a minute.

For example, you can ask that he touch your arm to get your attention, and you will let him know you've "heard" by putting your hand on top of his hand. Explain that this means you will get to him as soon as you can.

Or you could simply put a finger up to mean you'll be with him in a minute.

Now, this is not to say that you should drop everything and respond to your child's every whim and desire as fast as possible. Your child needs to learn patience. However, understanding that your child just wants to be heard will help shore up your own patience in those moments.

But here's the important part of this technique – it will work only if you give your child your full attention as soon as you can. If you say "just a minute" and then forget about it and get wrapped up in what you're doing for 15 more minutes, your child may lose trust in your "just a minute" and revert to whining again.

2. Empathize before you lecture. I am certainly guilty of jumping straight to the lecture of "You can't always get what you want." Or even "Life isn't fair."

But if you can catch yourself and show empathy for what your child wants, you may be able to stop the whining in its tracks.

On parents.com, Toni Schutta, a psychologist and parent coach in St. Paul, suggests that if you're at a store and your child whines for a toy, you reply with something like this: "That toy does look fun. Do you want me to add it to your wish list, or do you want to save up your money to buy it?"

First, you empathize with what your child wants: "That toy does look fun." Then, you give two positive choices for channeling that desire.

3. Show your child what to aim for. I don't trust myself to use this trick in the moment when I'm trying to address the whining. But it's been helpful when Abby and I are both calm.

According to askdrsears.com, it helps to show your child the difference between a whining voice and a pleasant voice.

We made it a game, which we've played two ways:

- I say something in a whining voice and ask Abby to rephrase it in a positive way. For example, in my most unpleasant tone, I say, "I don't wanna clean the living room. I'm tired." And then: "How would I say that in a nice way?" She may need some prodding, but we'll come up with a positive phrase together, like, "I feel tired. Will you help me clean the living room so it will go faster?"
- I say something in a whining voice and a pleasant voice, and ask Abby to choose which one she'd rather hear.

4. Let her know when she got it right. If your child does ask for something in a pleasant way, let her know that you appreciate it.

At parents.com, Michele Borba, Ed.D., author of *Parents Do Make a Difference*, suggests using a phrase like "Thank you for asking so nicely" or "When you use that voice, I can hear what you're saying so much better."

5. Don't ignore the whining. I can attest to the fact that ignoring whining just doesn't work. Abby will just whine more, or louder, until she gets a response. Meanwhile, every whine I ignore raises my blood pressure because I'm frustrated that she's still talking like that. So when I finally do respond, I lash out like a bear.

At parents.com, Rene Hackney, Ph.D., a developmental psychologist in Alexandria, Virginia, points out that the longer you let your child whine, the more determined she'll be to get her way.

But goodness, it is draining to **constantly** be correcting your child's tone.

If you need to take a break so you can respond calmly, feel free to go to another room and catch a few deep breaths first. I've also found it helpful to sneak away to the bathroom, look in the mirror, and give myself a few words of encouragement, like, "You can do this" or "This is just a phase."

6. Be playful. Kids learn through play. So if you can keep a playful attitude about helping your child learn this lesson, they'll learn much faster.

Here are a few ideas:

- On cnn.com, one mom shares how she uses a "whine" cup. When her child starts whining, she hands them the cup and says, "Here you go. Why don't you pour out your whine and bring me your regular voice."
- Another mom says what works for her is to whisper her answer back to her kids. They have to get quiet to hear her, and most of the time they will mimic her tone in their own reply.
- Try reading the book Monsters Eat Whiny Children to your kids.

7. Reconnect for a few minutes. When Abby's whining escalates, it's a clue to me that she may be feeling disconnected from me. Sometimes I get so wrapped up in my list of errands or chores that I forget to slow down and connect with my kids.

And when I'm not spending quality time with them, that's when they don't feel heard and the whining reaches record levels.

On webmd.com, educator and developmental psychologist Becky Bailey, PhD, points out that a little time together can go a long way. Sit down and read a book together, ask your child to help you with something, or just ask him what he'd like to do.

Chapter 2: A Simple Trick to Run Errands With No Whining From Your Kids

A puppy-shaped purse. A personal fan. A toy cat that meows like a real cat because I guess having five cats in your house isn't enough?

These are all things that my 7-year-old Abby has seen while we were running errands in various stores, and she insisted she **just had** to own them.

What do I mean by "insisted"? The sales pitch typically started with whining, progressed to pouting, and sometimes crescendoed with truly spectacular temper tantrums.

But thanks to one simple parenting trick, we no longer have to expend Herculean effort to escape a store without our child whining or begging for us to buy something.

WHAT'S THE BIG DEAL, ANYWAY?

This isn't **just** a case of not wanting to listen to my kid whining. That's part of it.

But a child's ability to self-regulate – resist impulses, control emotions, and so on – is actually a bigger predictor of success in school than the child's IQ. Plus, children who can control their impulses turn into adults who are healthier and have greater financial stability.

By teaching my child how to keep her impulses in check, I'm setting her up for a life of success and immeasurable wealth, which I'm **sure** she'll use to put me in the bestest, poshest old person's home that money can buy.

3 EASY STEPS TO ESCAPE A STORE WITH NO WHINING

When Abby asks for something at a store, this is our surefire process to avoid a meltdown:

1. **Acknowledge the desire.** This could be as simple as saying, "Yeah, that Crazy Cat Lady action figure *is* really cool." When I forget this step, the whole solution just doesn't work as well. (And hey, I have absolutely zero idea what I'd do with these egg holders I always see in Anthropologie, but my desire to own them has infiltrated every fiber of my soul. So I really do get it, kiddo.)
2. **Ask this question.** "Do you want me to add it to your wish list?" This transforms the focus of the moment from wanting something RIGHT

NOW to evaluating whether it's something on par with the things on her birthday and Christmas wish list.

3. **Honor the answer.** If she says yes, I pull out my phone, open the Evernote app that I never leave home without, and add that thing to her running wish list. No matter how ridiculous that thing may be. Bacon band-aids? Of course! Who wouldn't want those?

And that's it!

Not only do we head off whining at the pass, we have a ready-made wish list when grandparents need gift ideas.

Oh, and maybe this **goes without saying**, but an important part of this equation is: Don't buy toys when your kid asks for them.

Sure, it's fun to see that look of joy on their grubby little face, but you're actually confusing the heck out of your kid. They'll continue asking for stuff because that one time, they asked and you got it for them. They won't understand why **this time** you're being such a meanie, so they'll ramp up their efforts to convince you.

If you really want to surprise your kid, do it in a day or two. Let the moment of impulse pass – for your kid *and* you.

BUT THAT'S NOT THE BEST PART

Every month or two, we review the list with Abby. She sees the toys she wanted on a whim right alongside her **biggest** desires like a new bike or a family trip to the beach. It's the perfect opportunity for us to talk about how if you spend all your money on little stuff, you won't be able to save enough for your big goals like vacations.

In almost every case, she changes her mind and says she doesn't want the impulse toys on her wish list anymore.

Which is awesome.

Because **we** don't end up spending money on junky toys that will just end up as clutter in her room, and **she** learns the important life skill of impulse control.

A DISCLAIMER

In full disclosure, this trick doesn't prevent begging every **single** time. But about 95% of the time, it works like a charm.

For the deepest of desires (those adorable egg trays WILL be mine!), you may have to use another parenting tip from your toolbox.

Chapter 3: How to Deal With Tantrums Over Toys at the Store

For Thanksgiving one year, the girls, my husband Ty, and I visited family in Michigan. Abby was 6 years old at the time, and Bailey was 18 months.

We all gorged ourselves into a stupor, sealing the deal with a decadent cheesecake Ty made that just so happened to have 1,300 calories **per slice**.

Then on the Friday after Thanksgiving, it was time to load up the car and start the long drive back to Texas. We were stopping in Chicago for the night, so it wasn't a long drive, but we wanted to get in before dinnertime and hit a couple stores to check out Black Friday deals.

On our way out of town, we made a quick stop at a local grocery store to stock up on juice boxes, diapers, and a king size pack of Reese's peanut butter cups. The basic road trip essentials.

Halfway between the juice aisle and the candy aisle, the grocery store did something **very sneaky**.

They had a display set up that jutted out into the walkway, with boxes and boxes of an adorable doll and pony set.

And then Abby saw it.

Usually, one of two things will **save us** from full-on temper tantrums in a situation like this:

- If we have the foresight to prep Abby for the temptation before walking into a store, one magic trick has been foolproof. (See Chapter 4: When All Else Fails, Use This Magic Trick to Prevent Begging.)
- Once she has her sights on a toy, we listen to her gushing and then offer to add it to her wish list, which I keep in Evernote.

But this time was different.

This time, we were going toe-to-toe with a Black Friday deal.

AN EPIC BATTLE

"Mommy," Abby said. "Isn't this cute?" She pointed to the doll and pony.

"It is," I said, barely registering what I was looking at before turning my sights back to the candy aisle ahead of me.

"Can I have it?"

I knew **enough** to slow down. Turn around. "Toys aren't on our list to buy today. And that's a big toy. That would be like a Christmas or birthday present. Do you want me to add it to your wish list?"

"It's on sale," she said.

"It *is* on sale," I said. "But 50 bucks is still a lot of money."

"It's not 50 bucks. It's only 48." Who decided it was a good idea to teach math to first graders, anyway?

"That's close enough to 50 bucks. We're already going to the American Girl store tonight to find a new outfit on sale for your doll. Why would we buy you a whole separate doll, just because you happened to walk by it?"

My patience was waning. We had candy to buy, we needed to get on the road, and Bailey on my hip was starting to feel like a sack of **sweet potatoes**.

She lifted her face to look in my eyes. "But the sale is just for *today*."

I sighed. "No, we're not getting that toy today." My tone was clipped, short. I caught myself. "But I'd be happy to add it to your wish list."

Her chin dropped to her chest. She crossed her arms.

"C'mon, let's go," I said, motioning with my free arm.

She just stood there.

"Abby."

She turned away from me.

"We don't have time for this. Let's go. Now."

Nothing.

"If this is how you're going to act, I certainly don't want to take you to the American Girl store and buy you a small present just because."

Still nothing. Bailey slipped off my hip, and I hitched her back up.

"I'm going to turn and keep going. I would suggest you follow me."

I started walking again, and I turned my head slightly to listen. When I heard Abby dragging her feet behind me, I picked up speed.

Then the **begging** started.

"Can I still go to the American Girl store?" she asked.

"Right now, I don't think you deserve to."

Tears.

"Can I please go to the American Girl store?"

"You need to show me that you can be a big girl about this. You can't throw a fit every time there's a toy you don't get."

Pouting.

"Please? I promise I'll stop crying."

"I can tell that you're starting to turn it around. But you still have some work to do."

Tears again.

She didn't calm down until we were in the car and on the road for 45 minutes.

A STROKE OF PARENTING GENIUS

When Abby was ready, we had a good talk about budgets. About how pouting is not a good way to get what you want. About how new things **won't** make you happy.

Ty spoke up. "How about this. We'll give you the money we budgeted to spend for you on this trip." He glanced over at me to see if I was digging where he was going.

I smiled and nodded.

"And," he continued. "It's your job to find something at the store that fits that budget. You can't spend a single penny over what we give you."

Abby was totally on board.

When we got to our hotel in Chicago, we gave her $30 cash.

As I handed it over, I said, "You know, when I was a little girl your age, I never got $30 to spend all on my own."

Abby smiled.

"Do you think you can handle this responsibility?" Ty asked.

She lifted her chin to hold her head **a little higher** and nodded.

Then we bundled up and headed out to the Magnificent Mile.

HOW TO DEAL WITH TANTRUMS: THE REAL TEST

I was nervous on the walk. Dreading another tantrum.

The cold seeped under my jacket, and my arms felt like **jelly** after carrying Bailey on my hip for a few blocks. (Remind me never to forget my trusty Ergo carrier at home again.)

But before too long, we were inside the American Girl store. I set Bailey down, and she toddled off toward a doll stroller.

Ty chased after her, and I turned to Abby.

"What are you looking for?" I asked.

"I'm not sure." I followed her eyes to the Isabelle display. The doll of the year. The one they sell only for one year.

Oh dear, I thought.

Then **without a word**, she walked up to the sign and started reading prices.

"How much do I have again?"

"30 dollars," I said.

"This dance outfit is on sale for $28. That's less than $30," she said.

"It is. Is that what you'd like to get?"

She was quiet for a few seconds. Then: "I want to keep looking."

I followed Abby around the store as she read prices.

She found a set of doll pajamas for $24. "If I get this, how much would I have left over?"

"You tell me," I said.

She held out her hands and bent down her fingers, one at a time. "Six?"

I smiled. And **decided not** to introduce the maddening concept of sales tax quite yet. "Yep."

"If I get these pajamas, maybe I can use the rest to get something small?"

"Maybe," I said. But I was skeptical we'd find anything for $6 or less in that store.

Still, we traipsed around, checking price tag after price tag.

Finally, we found a doll purse on sale for $6.

"Whatcha think?" I asked. "Ready to go pay for these?"

Abby tilted her head and narrowed her eyes at the purse.

"I think I'd rather save the six dollars," she said.

"Oh!" I said. "Well, that's a great idea."

After we checked out, I turned to Abby. "What do you think? Was that fun to work with a budget?"

She smiled. "Yes."

"What was fun about it?"

"Because I got to save some money."

Who is this kid?

AN IDEA BEFORE ITS TIME

We found Ty and Bailey. She was still playing with the same doll stroller, 30 minutes later. Poor Ty.

"How'd it go?" he asked.

"Great," I said. "She did all the math herself. And she decided to get something a little cheaper and save the rest."

He held out his hand to Abby for a **high-five**. "Nice work, girl."

She high-fived back and grinned big.

"You know what would be fun, Abby?" I asked.

"What?"

"Well, when you're a little older, we could give you the whole house budget for a week. Everything you'd need to pay the bills and buy groceries and go out for ice cream. And you can be in charge of making sure we spend it all the right way so we have enough to do everything we need to do."

She didn't answer.

"What do you think?" I asked.

"I don't want to."

Took the wind right out of my sails. "But how else will you learn to take care of money and bills before you're an adult?"

She shrugged.

In my exasperation, I looked up at Ty, and he was shaking his head and chuckling.

"Baby steps," he mouthed.

Chapter 4: When All Else Fails, Use This Magic Trick to Prevent Begging

I have a problem.

Or to be more accurate: My whole family has a problem. Me, my husband Ty, and even Abby.

There exists a place that when we cross the threshold, we lose all our common sense. We wear goofy, excited grins. Visions of "what if" dance behind our eyes. And we can't **keep our hands to ourselves**.

This place is Target.

I'm certainly not the first to lament the phenomenon that is Target. You walk in to pick up deodorant and a bag of cat food, and you walk out with that, plus apple pie-flavored coffee, washi tape, and a case of blue mason jars. You have no idea what you'll do with a case of blue mason jars, but A CASE! FOR TEN DOLLARS! You'd be silly to pass up that kind of a deal, really.

My particular **weakness** is all the super cute Christmas home decor – glittery reindeer and a patchwork quilt fox and a snow globe full of holiday cheer? YES, PLEASE. Ty's got it bad for Dove chocolates and string lights. And Abby's drawn to…everything, actually.

By the end of a Target shopping trip after she's heard "no" approximately 427 times, she's pouting, whiny, even out-and-out defiant – or on a good day, all three at once.

SOMETHING HAD TO CHANGE

We tried logic first.

"If we spent all our money on stuff we don't need, we wouldn't be able to pay for our house or cars or electricity or food."

She understood.

But it didn't stop her wanting.

Our next try was a little more effective.

I created a note in Evernote called "Abby's Wish List."

Anytime she asks for something in the store, I say: "We can't get that today, but I can add it to your wish list." Then I pull up the note on my phone, type the name of the item, and show her the list.

She likes this a lot. And it works **most** of the time.

BUT HERE'S THE ROOT OF THE PROBLEM

She sees us succumb to temptation. Every. Single. Time.

We ask her to practice restraint and keep a running wish list, while we impulse buy.

I cannot think of a single trip to Target (or the grocery store, for that matter) where we haven't walked out with **something extra** not on the original shopping list.

As giddy as our little Target treats make me, I had to admit we would all benefit from shopping with a little more intention. Even five dollars here and there adds up. Not to mention we were setting a bad example.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU PARENT BY THE SEAT OF YOUR PANTS

One weekend with Abby, we all piled into the car for a trip to **our favorite temptress**.

On the list: a couple strands of Christmas lights and baby shoes – to keep baby Bailey's socks on her feet in the cold weather.

Ty pulled into a parking spot, and I had an idea.

I turned in my seat to face everyone. "Okay, now let's remember before we go in. Target has a magic spell over us."

At the word "magic," Abby's eyes got big.

I continued. "Every time we go in there, we see all this stuff we want. And it's like we can't control ourselves, we just want, want, want! We need to be strong and not let the magic spell be the boss of us."

Ty smiled. Abby nodded. Bailey chewed on her socks.

THE REAL TEST

Inside the store, the first section we passed was girls' clothes. **Of course.** Target ain't no dummy.

Abby pointed to a purse shaped like a puppy. "Look at! That's so cute."

"Oh man," I said. "Their magic spell is already getting us!"

"Yeah." Her arm dropped. "It's like, they have so much cute stuff, we just want it all."

"It's EXACTLY like that," I agreed.

We moved on. I let out a breath I didn't realize I was holding.

A couple minutes later, Abby ran ahead to the kids' movie display and picked up a DVD light on plot and **heavy** on princesses.

When we caught up to her, she said, "I wish I could watch this movie."

"I know!" I said. "It's like magic, right? We can hardly control ourselves."

Abby put the movie down and kept walking with us.

Huh, I thought. *Could this actually work?*

We got to the baby shoes, picked out a pair that looked 100% Bailey-proof (**spoiler:** they weren't), and headed to the Christmas area.

Oh my.

The owls. The glitter. The prepackaged Christmas cheer at a perfectly reasonable price.

I picked up a teal mercury glass owl. *Swoon*.

"Isn't this adorable?" I held it up to Ty and Abby.

"Aww," Abby said.

To Ty, I said, "It's only twelve bucks."

"No, Mommy. You have to put it back."

I laughed. "You're right! I let the magic spell get me."

I put the owl back and smiled at Ty. "She catches on fast."

Then we came to a white reindeer figurine.

I pointed. "Look! That would go perfect with our glittery reindeer we picked up last year."

"How much is it?" Ty asked.

"Fifteen."

"Not bad," he said.

I reached a hand out to the poor little homeless reindeer.

"Mommy, no! It's getting you again."

"Oh," I said. Pulled my hand back.

I turned to Ty. "Whose idea was this, anyway?"

DID IT REALLY WORK?

Abby didn't whine or pout **once**. We didn't even have to whip out the wish list.

Then on our way out, we passed by the coffee aisle and remembered we were low in that department.

We spent a couple minutes standing in front of the sea of flavors and settled on one.

"But Mommy," Abby said. "That wasn't on our list."

"I know," I said. "But trust me, you won't like it if we run out of coffee. We'll be like hangry, only a million times grumpier."

She was quiet for a few seconds. Then: "Okay, you can get coffee."

So yeah, it worked. A little too well.

Chapter 5: A Quick Fix for a Pouting Kid

When Bailey was a baby, my routine when I got home from work was to cuddle up with her on the couch to nurse.

One day, big sister Abby sat down next to us while I nursed Bailey.

"How was your day?" I asked.

"Good."

Bailey responded with a **hefty kick**, accidentally connecting with Abby's gut.

Abby doubled over.

"Ouch! Are you okay?" I asked.

She shook her head.

I put my arm around Abby's shoulder and kissed her forehead.

"Your sister is a stinker, huh?"

We talked for a couple more minutes, then Bailey kicked **again**. This time, she got me in the face.

Abby laughed.

"Whoa," I said. "Did I laugh when you got kicked?"

She hung her head.

Sensing a **meltdown** coming, I tried to head it off. "Hey, mistakes happen! Don't let it ruin your day. I just want you to remember to treat other people how you want to be treated."

Abby jumped off the couch and ran up the stairs away from me.

"Hey!" I called. "You don't have to pout about this. Let's talk."

Crickets.

LEARN FROM MOMMY'S MISTAKES

This was a common scene in our house. At least daily.

Abby does something less than desirable, we try to engage her in a conversation about it, and she pouts and runs away.

The **problem** was I could totally understand where she's coming from.

Even after 36 years of making mistakes, I still don't like being told I've done something "wrong."

But one of my goals as a parent is to raise our girls to know how to deal with conflict.

I had to learn that lesson the **hard way** as an adult.

In my sophomore year of college, my roommate and I had an argument. I don't even remember what we were arguing about. Probably something super important like me polishing off the last of the Fruity Pebbles without replacing it.

But we both stopped talking to each other.

For months.

On move-out day, we didn't even say **goodbye**.

The silent treatment? Not so effective, as it turns out.

MY EUREKA MOMENT

That night, as I nursed Bailey and stewed about Abby running away from a tough conversation AGAIN, I tried to think of another approach.

Running after her and trying to engage her in conversation **never worked**. Besides that, I didn't exactly feel like getting up from the couch after a sleepless night with a teething baby and a long day at work.

Nothing came to me.

I waited for Bailey to finish, and we trudged up the stairs after Abby.

She was playing dolls in the living room, using the bookshelf as a dollhouse.

I walked up and rested my hand on her head. "Hey, we need to talk about what just happened."

"I don't know what to say."

"Well, do you understand why I got upset when you laughed?"

She stood up and started walking away.

"Why are you leaving? We're just talking."

She rounded the corner to the dining room. "Talking about it makes me sad."

I threw my head back, took a deep breath, and brought my head level again. My eyes fell on a book: Playful Parenting.

I read this book **before** I became a parent, and it made a big impression on me. (I even have a Pinterest board named after it.)

One part that came back to me in that moment is the idea of a "time-in" instead of a "time-out."

Here's the gist of it: When your child does or says something that you don't like, use that as a teachable moment. Don't banish them to their room or a corner to stew in their own stress hormones because they won't learn anything lasting that way.

In that difficult moment, **choose to connect** with your kid. Confront the issue head-on.

BUT WOULD IT WORK?

I followed Abby into the dining room and set Bailey down on the floor. She toddled off in the direction of the living room, probably to ingest some choking hazard attached to the dolls Abby left on the bookshelf.

I pulled out the chair next to Abby and sat down. She stared down at the table.

"I have an idea," I said.

"What." Monotone.

"How about next time you feel so sad you want to run away, you come and sit on my lap instead?"

She looked up. **Definitely** not what she was expecting.

"Can you do that for me?" I asked.

She nodded. Then without saying a word, she stood up and climbed into my lap.

Finally, we talked about what happened. It was a tough conversation, but Abby didn't run away.

And because she didn't run away, I didn't get frustrated and lose my patience.

We managed to have a CALM tough conversation, for the **first time ever**.

I asked questions like:

- "What if a friend at school trips and falls down? Is it kind to laugh?" and
- "What if I had laughed first when Bailey kicked me? Would it be okay for you to laugh then?" and
- "What if a friend laughs at you falling down? And the next day they fall down, is it okay to laugh at them because they laughed at you?"

When we were all talked out, we hugged.

Abby stood up. "Can we practice?"

"Practice what?"

"Can we pretend I'm at school and a friend trips?"

So then we did some role-playing, which resulted in smiles and laughing and the **best kind** of learning.

A far cry from her running off to pout and being in a bad mood all night.

THE VERDICT

In the 24 hours after our first "time-in," Abby came up to me four times and said:

"I feel sad like I want to run away from the room."

I cleared my lap (one time of a baby, another time a laptop), pulled her gangly body onto my lap, and listened.

Instead of these little hiccups sending us off course for 30 minutes or an hour (or more), we dealt with them head-on when they happened.

No tears, no lingering hard feelings. And **every time** ends with a hug and smiles.

Next time your kid deals with a tough situation by running away, try suggesting they come and sit with you instead. Every kid is different, so of course this won't work with all kids.

But even if it takes a while to talk about the hard stuff, the extra connection and **reminder** that you love them will probably help the conversation go MUCH more smoothly.

Chapter 6: How to Handle Your Kid's Temper Tantrum Like a Ninja Badass

A while ago, this post was everywhere you turned on the Internet.

A quick summary: Some guy in a grocery store made a rude comment about a mom with a screaming child in tow. The blogger overheard and made a comment of his own.

The **best part** in the whole post:

"A kid going berserk at a grocery store doesn't indicate the quality of his parents, anymore than a guy getting pneumonia after he spends six hours naked in the snow indicates the quality of his doctor. Grocery stores are designed to send children into crying fits. All of the sugary food, the bright packaging, the toys, the candy — it's a minefield. The occasional meltdown is unavoidable, the real test is how you deal with it. This mother handled it like a pro. **She was like mom-ninja; she was calm and poised, but stern and in command.**"

When I've been in the same situation as that mom? The OPPOSITE of calm.

My face gets **pink and hot**, and I feel like everyone's watching me while I flounder.

And now as I navigate the choppy waters of trying to keep **two** kids happy while I run endless errands, I need a better strategy than "leave the shopping cart where it is, exit the building as fast as possible, and NEVER GO BACK TO THAT STORE."

I'm running out of grocery stores.

8 WAYS TO ACHIEVE NINJA MOM STATUS

I'm in awe of that calm ninja mom. So I decided to do some research on how she handles her kids' tantrums so well.

Here are the best tips I found. Try them out the next time your kid has a nuclear meltdown over a box of Cinnamon Toast Crunch, and channel your own ninja badass.

1. Stave off the Hangry

This one's easy. Bring snacks with you everywhere you go, and be mindful of your kid's nap time.

When kids are hungry and/or tired, they have zero tolerance for any little disappointment that crops up. And in the case of toddlers, their language skills aren't developed enough to politely ask for a snack and a nap.

Susan Epperly, an Atlanta-based parent coach and writer on early childhood, compares the situation to this: You have listened to exactly one audio lesson in Swahili. Suddenly, you find yourself in Africa. You're tired and hungry, and you are none too happy about it.

How do you communicate this? How do you find food? A place to sleep?

That would be incredibly frustrating. And yet our children find themselves in this situation ALL the time.

Come to think of it, *I'm* not exactly a peach when I'm hungry and tired. And I've had lots of practice at functioning in society.

Solution: Stick a raisin box in junior's hand when you get to the grocery store. And don't push it trying to get stuff done when you know it's past his nap time.

2. Watch and Learn

Does your kid freak out when she sees all the candy in the checkout lane? Do your attempts to get your little guy dressed before you leave in the morning end in screaming and tears?

Research shows that events leading up to a tantrum are critical to whether the tantrum actually takes place.

Pay attention to the situations where your child tends to lose his cool. When you **see a trend**, brainstorm ways to avoid the breakdown.

- In the checkout lane at the grocery store, ask your little one to be your helper and count the grocery items as you take them out of the basket.
- If your mini-me begs you to buy every piece of candy or toy that comes in their line of sight, try the magic spell trick from Chapter 1: 7 Ways to Stop Your Kid From Whining for getting out of the store tantrum-less.
- If you tend to do battle over getting dressed in the morning, try giving him a choice between two items: "It's time to get dressed now. Do you want to wear your red shirt or your blue shirt?"

- When your kid gets wiped out from running errands, try these stress busters: plan a quick break where she can run around or do something to make her laugh.

3. Loosen the Reins
So what if your kid leaves the house wearing polka dots and plaid?

A toddler's crazy style doesn't lock him into a lifetime of no fashion sense. You'll have plenty of time to teach him what matches when he's older. And if other people judge you for letting your kid dress himself, **who cares**? Not a ninja badass.

If your little one eats 3 peas instead of 20 or won't give Grandma a kiss, it may not be worth it to turn it into a fight.

Save your energy for the stuff that matters, and don't make a big deal out of the small stuff.

4. Secure Your Oxygen Mask First
Let's say you've done everything you can to ward off a tantrum, but you start to see the warning signs of impending doom.

The worst thing you can do? Lose your own cool.

Michael Potegal, Ph.D., a pediatric neuropsychologist, calls this the Anger Trap. If you yell back or respond just as irrationally as your kid, he compares it to throwing gas on a fire.

If you want the storm to pass quickly, take a few seconds to brace yourself. Some ideas:

- Take several deep belly breaths.
- Repeat a mantra. Come up with a simple statement to help you keep perspective, and think it or say it quietly to yourself. This could be as simple as "You can handle this." Your mantra could be "This too shall pass." Or maybe "I am a badass."
- Check the time. According to Potegal's research, the average tantrum lasts about **three minutes**. So glance at a clock, and add 10 minutes. Remember that as long as you don't fall into the Anger Trap, the worst part should be over by then.

5. Don't Do These 3 Things
To keep the tantrum as short as possible:

1. **Don't give in.** If junior is throwing a fit over a Snickers bar, don't give him the damn Snickers bar. Sure, it may help you escape the situation this time. But giving in teaches him that all he has to do when he wants something is go berserk.

2. **Don't ignore or punish.** Research shows ignoring tantrums doesn't help, nor does punishing them with time-outs. Think back to a time when you were really upset. Maybe your boyfriend had just dumped you and you had been SURE he was The One. Or that time you got a talking-to from your boss's boss and nearly crapped your pants. You probably met your best friend and confided every tiny detail – twice – and sobbed into your wine glass. Now imagine if when your friend first got wind you were upset, she turned away and pretended not to hear you. Or worse, she got up from the table, left the room, and shut the door behind her. Would you magically snap out of your emotional upset and be happy as a clam? Your kid doesn't work that way either.

3. **Don't reason.** You can't reason with a child in the middle of a tantrum. Her brain just won't compute what you're trying to say. Don't ask questions, don't use logic, don't tell her "That's not important." The maybe-I-can-talk-some-sense-into-her approach will probably intensify the tantrum and make it last even longer.

6. Say the Magic Words
So what CAN you say?

Acknowledge your child's feelings. This simple step can shorten the tantrum dramatically. And it makes sense, when you think about it. Going back to our example of when you've been most upset: Imagine your friend looks you in the eye and says, "You're upset. You were hoping that Billy was the person you were going to marry one day." And then she gives you a hug.

When we're upset, we want to be heard. Labeling your emotion can help you calm down and move on. Your kid is the same way.

Here are a few examples of how to validate your kid's emotions without giving into his demands:

- "You are so mad. You are showing me how much you wanted that candy." (Source)
- "I'm sorry you're (state the emotion). When you calm down, I'll give you a hug, and we can talk about what happened." (Source)

- Use reflection. For example, if his arms are crossed: "Your arms are going like this (cross your arms). Your face looks like this (mirror his facial expression)." He will probably look at you, so take a deep breath. He might unconsciously take a deep breath with you. Then say: "You seem (state the emotion). You were wanting (state the desire)." (Source)

- "I can see you're really upset. I wish I could help you calm down right now. Here, why don't you draw a picture that shows me how mad you are?" Replace drawing with any activity you think will be soothing to your kid or will help them redirect their energy to something positive. (Source)

- "I love you no matter what you say, and you're a good kid. But we need to take a break and then talk about this." (Source)

If your child will let you, holding or hugging him can help calm him down, too.

7. Get the Heck Outta Dodge
This is usually my first choice when a tantrum hits. But I discovered I'm **doing it wrong**.

Not only have I been skipping the empathize step more often than not, I've been getting us out of the situation in a hissy fit of my own – clenching my jaw, picking up my girl like she's a sack of sweet potatoes, and storming out of the grocery store.

Turns out my job is to be a role model for the calm behavior I expect from my kids. PARENTING IS HARD.

If you're at home, I love this advice to find a way to stay nearby your upset child and keep your cool: Stay where your child can see you, but divert your attention to something else while your child calms down. You can be a role model for calming activities like taking deep breaths, tidying up, or flipping through a photo album.

8. Circle Back
When everyone is calm again, it's tempting to sigh with relief and put the whole episode out of your mind. But if you want your child to learn how to self-regulate her emotions, it's important to talk about what happened.

This is a pain in the ass, and Abby pretty much hates it. But after we've talked, we're always glad we did. (Yes, Abby, too.)

We do this to reinforce why we said no, why her behavior was unacceptable, and **most importantly** – more positive ways for her to handle her emotions in the future.

Her favorite part of these talks: Role-playing. We'll pretend to get upset and stomp our feet or slam the door, then we'll ask her, "Is that what we do when we're upset?" She'll smile and say, "No!" Then she tells us or shows us the more positive ways to handle feeling upset.

Here are a few that we use, but this list of scientifically backed ways to reduce stress might give you some ideas too. (Two coolest tricks I'll be trying: chewing gum and smelling some lavender.)

- Take deep breaths – at least three. Together, if she wants. Abby likes to count them out, too.
- Listen to music. When she's feeling down, Abby loves Be OK by Ingrid Michaelson. Or here's a list of 6 surprisingly soothing songs.
- Hug or hold hands.

I also love this idea I saw on Pinterest: the calm-down jar. The child shakes it and watches the glitter settle while they take deep breaths. More ideas for how to make your own calm-down jar are here, here, and here.

Chapter 7: How to Turn a Temper Tantrum Into a Teachable Moment

Temper tantrums. Meltdowns. Angry outbursts.

Whatever you call it, when your kid throws a **temper tantrum** – whether they're a toddler or a teenager – it's absolutely *zero* fun.

And when the dust settles, my first instinct is to put it behind me and pretend it never happened.

But when I don't circle back with my kid after a tantrum, I'm missing out on a huge opportunity for a teachable moment.

HERE'S WHY

Let's suppose my husband and I acted like that with each other.

Maybe I forgot run the dishwasher before bedtime, and now it's the next morning and he realizes my**mistake**. Oatmeal is kinda hard to make without a clean bowl, and he's already running late. He might lose his temper, raise his voice, and stomp off to the shower without eating breakfast.

It doesn't take a marriage counselor to know that if we *never* spoke of the incident again – if we just pretended it didn't happen – that wouldn't make for a healthy, long-lasting relationship.

And yet, I find myself wanting to just shove my kids' temper tantrums under the rug and **move on**.

Unfortunately for me, that's not a wise parenting move.

WHY A TEMPER TANTRUM AIN'T OVER WHEN IT'S OVER

When kids learn how to deal with conflict in a positive way, research shows that kids' confidence and self-esteem increase, they become creative problem-solvers, and they have stronger friendships. Just like in a healthy marriage, an **important** part of kids dealing with conflict in a positive way is waiting until everyone is calm and then talking about what happened.

And all this leads to happier kids.

But let's say you're ready to revisit the cause of the tantrum, but your **kid** isn't.

Instead of calmly resolving a disagreement, she runs away and pouts.

What do you do when you're ready to lecture her about what went wrong, and she flat-out refuses to talk about what happened?

AN EMBARRASSING MEMORY

One night, I was flipping through my journal where I record the cute things our kids say and do. The entries are short, and my handwriting messy.

For example, here's an entry from the beginning of last summer about a conversation between me and our then 6-year-old Abby:

Me: "What do you wanna learn about this summer? Dinosaurs? Outer space?"

Abby: …

Me: "History?"

Abby: "Yeah!" Pause. "What's history?"

But as I was flipping through and chuckling to myself, I came across an entry that was a couple **pages**long. So I stopped to read it.

And I was reminded of one of the stupidest things I've ever done as a parent. Here's what happened.

ROOKIE MISTAKE

One weekend afternoon a few months ago, we took the kids out for ice cream.

We had SUCH a good time that from there, we decided to take them to the toy store and let them pick out a new jigsaw puzzle. Just because.

Only we didn't **tell** them we were going in to pick out a puzzle. We just drove there.

When we got out of the car in the toy store parking lot, Abby's eyes got wide. (Our toddler Bailey was oblivious.)

We walked into the toy store and let Abby run off to explore, and Ty and I walked over to the puzzle area with Bailey on my hip.

A couple minutes later, Abby came running up to us with some plastic monstrosity designed for two-year-olds. "Mommy! Can I have this?"

"No," I said. "That's for kids Bailey's age."

She hung her head and walked away.

Then after another couple minutes, she was **back** with another toy. "I want this! Can we get it?"

I was staring at a puzzle of Positano, Italy, and daydreaming of Mediterranean beaches and gelato and wine.

"No," I snapped. "We're just getting a puzzle."

Which would be the first time we explained to Abby our intentions in coming to the toy store.

She kept picking out toys, I kept saying no, and she got increasingly frustrated and upset until **it happened**.

A full-blown temper tantrum.

BUT THAT WASN'T THE HARD PART

Abby was *beyond* reason.

Crying. Stomping her feet. Whining.

Extracting her from the store squeezed every **last** drop of patience out of this mama.

She cried most of the way home, but the further we got from the store, the calmer she got.

Within 30 minutes of getting home, she was back to her regular, happy self.

We played LEGOs for a while and had dinner, then it was time for bed.

With her pajamas on and teeth brushed, Abby jumped into bed and pulled the covers up to her chin. I sat down in the chair next to her bed.

"So," I said. And I hesitated. I was **bone** tired, and she was calm and ready for bed. I still had a toddler to coax into sleep after I was done with Abby's bedtime.

But I took a deep breath and kept going.

"We need to talk about what happened at the toy store today. Do you want to talk about it now, or after bedtime story?"

"Now," she said, frowning.

She pulled the covers up over her head.

Oh boy, I thought.

"Can I hold your hand while we talk about it?" I asked.

"No."

"Can I hold your foot?"

"No."

"Can I hold your nose?"

The tiniest hint of a giggle. "No."

"What can I hold?"

"You can hold one finger," she said. And she peeked out from the covers and offered me an index finger, which I grabbed onto.

"I know you don't want to talk about this," I said. And then I stopped.

Exactly **how** was I going to convince her to talk about a tough subject? An image flashed through my mind of an adult Abby having a disagreement with her boyfriend about who should walk the dog in the rain – and Abby running off to hide under the covers.

Then I had an idea. "Here's the thing, Abby. When something happens like what happened at the toy store, it gives you a little boo-boo on your heart. And me too."

Her eyes got wide.

"And when you get a boo-boo – any kind of boo-boo – you have to clean it out so it doesn't get infected and swollen and itchy and red and puffy," I said. "But…is it fun to clean out a boo-boo?"

"No," she said.

"Right. Cleaning it out is the hard part and it's no fun, but you have to do that before you can put a band-aid on it so it can heal."

I leaned **closer** to her and lowered my voice to just above a whisper. "Do you know the way you clean out a heart boo-boo?"

She shook her head.

"By talking about what happened." I leaned back again. "Why don't you go pick out some band-aids for us and come back, and we'll clean out the boo-boos."

"For real?" she asked.

"Yes, for real."

She got up out of bed, disappeared into her bathroom, and came back with two unicorn band-aids.

DID IT WORK?

After Abby climbed back into bed, I reached for her index finger again. "I'm sorry for not explaining to you why we were going to the toy store. We were there to pick out a new puzzle, and that's it. But I didn't tell you that before we got there, and I should have."

She stared at me.

"Is there anything you're sorry for?" I asked.

"No."

"Anything you wish you hadn't done?"

"I don't know." She looked down. "Did I do anything bad?"

"Well…" I hesitated, scared to set off a pouting episode. "When you stomped your feet and talked to me in that tone, it felt like you didn't respect me."

She ducked her head down. "Sorry," she mumbled.

"Sorry for what, hon?"

"Sorry for stomping my feet and talking cranky."

Not the most heartfelt apology, but it was **better** than her hiding under the covers again.

We came up with a plan for how to handle going into a toy store. Before we walk in, we'll talk about what we're there to buy.

If she sees something really cool, she can ask me to add it to her wish list, which I keep in Evernote on my phone.

We talked – not for the first time – about how we can't get everything that looks cool because we wouldn't have enough money to pay for our house and food and car.

When we were all **talked out**, I said: "Is your heart boo-boo clean?"

She closed her eyes tight, then opened them again. "Yes, I think so."

"Are you sure? Is there any dirt or anything left in it?"

She giggled. "No." Then, quietly: "Is your heart boo-boo clean too?"

I smiled. "Yes, it is. Are you ready to put the band-aids on?"

We each opened a band-aid.

I reached over and put a band-aid over her heart, on top of her pajamas.

She reached up and put a band-aid over my heart, on top of my shirt. As it **turns out**, my heart is pretty close to my shoulder. Who knew?

Abby sealed my band-aid with a kiss. So I did the same.

5 STEPS TO TURN A TEMPER TANTRUM INTO A TEACHABLE MOMENT

Since that conversation months ago, we've referred back to the concept of "heart boo-boos" on at least a weekly basis. The metaphor helped Abby understand why it's important to talk about arguments or tantrums, even if it's a tough conversation to have.

If you'd like to use the concept of heart boo-boos with your kid, please let me know how it goes! Just keep these principles in mind to increase your chance of success.

1. Wait

Make sure you and your child are **both** calm before trying to talk about what happened. You can't reason with a child in the middle of an emotional upheaval. Her brain just won't compute what you're trying to say.

And the same goes for you. When stress hormones are flooding your system, you're **not** ready to have a calm, logical talk. Try taking some deep belly breaths together before you start the conversation.

2. Reconnect

Any loving touch will trigger the release of the hormone oxytocin, which helps bring the body into a calm, relaxed state. You could give your kid a hug, rub their shoulder, or hold hands – or even index fingers, apparently. **Anything** to show that you still love him, even though you experienced conflict.

3. Be Playful

You can diffuse a lot of tension with humor or acting silly. For example, when Abby resisted holding my hand, I asked if I could hold her foot or her nose. Not super creative, but it got the job done. You can tickle your child (if they

like that), make a funny face, or turn on music and have a family dance party. Whatever works for your child and your family.

4. Listen
This conversation isn't a time for you to unload a lecture. It needs to be a two-way conversation, which means you should listen to your child's feelings, too.

You can **prompt** your child to start talking with a question like, "How did you feel about what happened?" Then reflect back what your child says to show her you empathize with her feelings.

5. Stay Neutral
If you start off the conversation by calling your kid names like a "brat" or "whiny," your child will likely shut **right** down. I love these tips from Dr. Laura Markham.

- Use "I" statements to describe your feelings. Example: "When you talked in that tone, I felt like you didn't respect me." instead of "You're so disrespectful."
- Describe the facts of the situation and avoid making judgments. Example: "You stomped your feet, crossed your arms, and yelled." instead of "You acted like a total brat."
- Share information instead of making accusations. Example: "I saw the iPad on the kitchen counter, after we said no more iPad today." instead of "Did you use the iPad when I told you not to?"