

# Families First

a newsletter for Nebraska Families

May / June 2022

N F A P A

## THE HEARTFELT WAY TO DEAL WITH TANTRUMS AND MELTDOWNS: BE AN EMOTION COACH FOR YOUR CHILD

About Ashley Soderlund Ph.D.

*Inside: We feel uncomfortable with big displays of emotions because we have been taught that emotions need to be “controlled.” But what if the tantrums and meltdowns we see in our kids are them trying to express big emotions? What if instead of trying to “control” the behavior we could instead help them express how they feel in a way that honors their needs and the needs of those around them?*

Imagine for a moment that emotions are neither bad nor good, that they are **simply pure energy**. Now imagine that you can use that energy however you want to use it — perhaps to withdraw into comfort or to push forward and try to do something hard or to reach out and connect with someone.

**This is the theory of functional emotions — the idea that emotions have a function and exist for a reason.**

When you think about emotions in this way, you realize that much of what you know about emotion has been colored by cultural messages. That our own discomfort with displays of emotions comes from an ingrained belief that emotions should be controlled, avoided, or dismissed as illogical.

In our attempt to control and avoid discomfort, we end up stuffing those emotions down inside until we become filled with anxiety or we explode. Unknowingly, we may be passing this harmful message of repressing emotions to our kids.

Our first instinct when our children have big emotions is to

stop the emotion — to make it better — to fix it. We hurt when our children hurt.

This is *especially* true for big displays of emotions like **tantrums or melt-downs**.

What if instead of trying to “control” our children’s emotions we help them express how they feel in a way that honors their needs and the needs of those around them? What if we could help our children see their emotions as helpful rather than harmful? To accept their emotions as a part of life.

**Simply emotional energy — neither bad nor good — rather ‘it is what it is.’**

**The Science of Emotions: Accepting Emotions Leads to Psychological Resilience**

The repression of emotions has been solidly linked to health problems, immune functioning, chronic conditions, depression, and more.

Some of the research I have done in children looks at the biological load of emotion — basically, we ask the question: *How stressful is emotion in the body?*

We compared children who suppressed distress to children who openly expressed their distress and found that the children who suppressed their emotions had higher cardiovascular arousal and greater stress enzymes.

In other words, the **biological stress or load** is higher for children who suppress their emotions.

In a study with adults, cardiovascular measures were taken



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# Attention Foster Parents!

## Earn Your In-Service Hours While Getting the Chance to Win a Great Prize!

Answer these 10 questions correctly and you will not only earn .5 credits toward your in-service hours, but your name will also be put in a drawing for a prize. For this issue we are offering a \$10 Walmart gift card.

There are a variety of ways to do this. You can email the information to [Corinne@nfapa.org](mailto:Corinne@nfapa.org), send the questionnaire to the NFAPA office at 3601 N. 25th Street, Suite D, Lincoln, NE 68521 or you can complete the questionnaire online at <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/MarApr2022> We will then enter your name in the drawing! We will also send you a certificate for training credit to turn in when it is time for relicensing. Good Luck!

1. Fill in the blank. Don't lose those opportunities to be really enthusiastic and say this was so great, it went \_\_\_\_\_.
2. True or False. Along with routines, previewing and countdowns are key. In the morning, you might lay out what the day is going to look like.
3. Fill in the Blanks. Solutions are \_\_\_\_\_ instead of \_\_\_\_\_ and could be the key to successfully parenting a kid who does not seem to care.
4. List 5 ways to discipline a kid who doesn't care.
5. Fill in the blanks. Conflict often occurs when parents try to control an area their teen feels is \_\_\_\_\_.
6. True or False. Teens see parents as sources of support as they discover what it means to be a good person in a complex world.
7. What are 6 tips for grandparents raising grandchildren?
8. What are five things grandparents can do to make visits go smoothly?
9. Advice for prospective Adoptive parents: List 5
10. List 2 topics that you would like to see discussed in this Newsletter.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone #: \_\_\_\_\_

(Continued from page 1)

after a social stress test. As you would expect, the participants became stressed in response to the test — their heart rates increased, their palms started sweating, and their blood vessels constricted.

**Blood vessel constriction** or narrowing of the arteries is one reason that chronic stress is associated with heart disease.

Participants were then told that sensations of stress — the racing heart, the sweaty palms — are a functional and adaptable response. *That stress can be helpful.*

After a second stress test, participants still showed an increase in heart rate, but the blood vessel constriction was gone.

*Thinking about stress as helpful instead of harmful made it true. The harmful biological effects of stress were gone.*

Repression of emotion leads to a greater load on the body. Expressing emotion and thinking about emotion as **functional changes** the harmful effects on the body. This is amazing!

***If we can help our children name their feelings and experience their feelings, emotions will begin to work for them rather than against them.***

## The Two-Step Mindful Emotions System

**Automatic reactions to emotion** are often impulsively lashing out or trying to stuff our emotions down inside and inhibit — neither of these is healthy long-term.

In contrast, **mindfully experiencing emotions** means we are aware of our emotions, we name them, and we experience them. Being mindful of our feelings leads to being able to *respond rather than react.*

This is the heart of emotion regulation — flexible responding, rather than automatic reacting.

## How to Emotion Coach Your Child Through a Tantrum

*The next time your child has a meltdown, see their smallness. See how their emotions are bigger than they are. And in that moment of truly seeing them, you will empathy rather than exasperation.*

Ashley Soderlund

## Step One: Name the Emotion

**The first step** to mindfully experiencing emotions is to help your child to notice how they feel. To help them to recognize the sensation of anger or worry and to be able to name it.

Naming the emotion makes it less overwhelming because it is identified as an emotion — *not who you are*. Not as something controlling you. Not as something that will last forever. Naming the emotion demystifies it.

**This step alone is so powerful for kids of all ages.**

Children are still learning to identify their emotions, so helping them name their feelings will help them feel understood — *to feel seen*. By naming how they feel, they also **acknowledge that feeling** without trying to change it or avoid

it — *a keystone of emotional intelligence.*

They simply notice the emotion as a part of themselves.

In this step — do not say: “*You are mad.*” Instead say, “*I notice that you are feeling some mad feelings.*” Or, “*it seems like part of you is feeling angry,*” or “*do you notice that you have a big feeling inside?*”

**This way the emotion is something to notice, not who they are.**

It is helpful to have tools for this step to help children identify how they feel. Books about emotions or stuffies with different expressions are wonderful to have in a calm-down space.

Because so many of my readers have emailed me over the years asking about how to do this step, I decided to create an instantly downloadable tool that you can print and use today.

I worked with an illustrator to create a set of printable tools designed specifically for helping children develop the skill to identify their emotions. I just love how the emotions come to life in these characters!

My **Mindful Emotions Toolkit** includes an *Emotion Poster*, *Emotion Cards*, *Emotion Wheel*, and *Emotion Thermometers*. The thermometers help your child to begin to think about emotions as energy as well. You can see more here: [Mindful Emotions Toolkit for Kids](#).

## Step Two: Hold Space For The Emotion With A Flexible Choice and Build Emotion Regulation Skills

After you help your child name and notice the emotion, you allow for them to feel it and reset.

**Resetting or recentering** is a step we often miss in helping our children manage emotions — but *coming back to yourself* can help strengthen your child’s sense of self — their core beliefs about themselves, security in themselves, and their confidence or self-efficacy.

Emotions come and go. In the “calm” times we have *self-energy* — theorized to include the **8C’s** — *Curiosity, Calmness, Clarity, Courage, Connectedness, Confidence, Creativity, and Compassion.*

The gateway back to self-energy is through sensory activities — doing things that are immersive and that your child loves to do. This is what you are scaffolding for your child to in the second step.

**The second step is to give your child a choice — ask your child, “do you want comfort, space, or silliness?”**

With that choice, you are giving your child a strategy for *how to handle* that big emotion and also to *recenter* back to their self-energy.

Some children want **comfort** when they are upset and seek connection. In the midst of a tantrum, these children may be soothed by a simple hug.

Other children need **space** to feel the emotion. They need a break. They are easily over-stimulated and need to process that emotion.

And some children, usually highly spirited children, need a stress release, they need to vent the feelings of anger and frustration inside. This is where *silliness and playfulness* can be a good choice.

When a child is really angry, space or silliness strategies might be more effective than comfort. Research shows that enhancing anger with aggression, like punching a pillow when you are mad, can lead to poorer cardiovascular outcomes.

But **silly venting** — where anger turns to laughter and releases pent-up stress, can relax the sympathetic nervous system.

Comforting when angry can actually escalate the emotion in some children. When children are sad or worried, they may be more likely to seek comfort.

### **An Example: Two-Step Mindful Emotions System™**

You are in the parking lot, and your 3-year-old wants to run. You scoop her up, and she starts to hit, flail, and scream. She is mad because her impulse to run has been blocked.

**As your child is flailing in your arms, you say:**

*“It is okay to feel angry, but not to show your anger with hands and feet. Are you feeling angry?”*

**Your child replies with a wail of frustration, but the flailing stops with your acknowledgment:**

*“That sounds like a mad sound! It is not safe to run here, and I will keep you safe. You can choose if you want comfort, space, or silliness.”*

**Your child says — “I feel mad! I want to be silly!”**

*“Okay, silly faces while we get in the car seat, let’s go!”*

### **Building a Foundation for Emotional Intelligence**

This is a deceptively simple strategy that helps your child develop a strong foundation for emotional intelligence. With these two steps children will learn that:

Emotions are just a part of them — that they are not who they are.

Feelings come and they go.

Once they recenter they see that they have self-energy separate from emotional energy.

Our feelings can be a message about what we might need or what we might learn.

Emotions are not scary. We can experience them and send them on their way.

With these two simple steps, you are doing two powerful things: **Honoring how your child feels and giving your child a way to regulate that emotion.** And you can do this anywhere! Even in a parking lot!

Keep in mind that the parts of the brain underlying regulation are just barely organized at age three and will continue to develop until about the age of seven.

This system works for both younger and older children. Younger children are learning how to identify emotions and

make a choice that feels right for them. For older children, the system helps them realize emotions are just one part of them and that they can choose how to respond and then recenter.

**Your child will not always be able to do these two steps.** *That is perfectly and developmentally normal.* That is also why it is important that any strategy that you use is no more than two steps. Children will struggle to identify how they feel and the emotions may be so big, it is hard for them to make a choice.

In these moments, use a basic Feeling-Break time-in and help to scaffold these skills with them by using tools and printable prompts.

With consistent use over time, your child will be able to use these strategies on the fly without tools or prompts! By consistently guiding your child through these two steps you will *build a foundation of healthy emotion regulation that will serve them their whole life.*

These practices lead to **awareness of our emotions.** Being mindful of our feelings leads to being able to **respond rather than react.**

Mindfully experiencing emotions means we recognize our emotions, we pay attention to them, and we acknowledge that emotional energy, stuffing down inside is no longer needed. And without needing to “control” your child’s emotions, your own stress, your own biological load, will be lifted as well.

### **About Ashley Soderlund Ph.D.**

Hi! As a mom and a child psychologist who spent over 15 years studying children’s emotional development, I am excited to share science-backed tips and tools with you so that you can thrive as a parent.

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[https://nurtureandthriveblog.com/handle-tantrums-and-meltdowns-with-love/?fbclid=IwAR13S8nKWaMe\\_RxP286EfxMntcHDXUoMfSuO2ME2feG54y2L6RWk4PIImOms](https://nurtureandthriveblog.com/handle-tantrums-and-meltdowns-with-love/?fbclid=IwAR13S8nKWaMe_RxP286EfxMntcHDXUoMfSuO2ME2feG54y2L6RWk4PIImOms)

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## **GROWING UP WITH TWO EMOTIONALLY UNAVAILABLE PARENTS**

Toxic stress in childhood from 2 unavailable parents or a single parent household

Trigger warning: Every now and then I start out writing a relatively benign article that winds up taking on a life of its own. Part lived experiences, part practical, and part academic can quickly morph into a very triggering article. My goal is not to trigger you, but to educate you. Please use this as a warning.

Many of us grew up with one emotionally unavailable or

unresponsive caregiver. They may have inadvertently taught us to dodge our own emotions because they raised us from a place of their own disconnection, where a pat on the head replaced those three little words we wanted to hear. Or, they may have been misaligned with our needs where the balance between attention and investment tilted toward All or Nothing, leaving us feeling either emotionally suffocated or invisible.

Sporadic misalignment between our parents and ourselves usually won't impact our long-term emotional development. No one is perfect, and life will inevitably stonewall us once in awhile. Emotional mismatches that happen every now and then can actually foster healthy emotional development by teaching us how to connect with ourselves during the times our parents are emotionally disconnected.

Having one emotionally disconnected parent can be tough, especially if they're the same sex as us. Because we tend to turn to our same-sexed parent in childhood as a model to teach us how to navigate our world, when they're emotionally unavailable, it's common for us to take on the behaviors or mannerisms of the emotionally available parent.

Less common, is for us to take on the mannerisms and behaviors of the emotionally unavailable parent as a way of seeking their attention. But, it happens. This is how people-pleasing begins where we learn to achieve or perform by "chasing" that caregiver's approval. This is also where our own insecure attachment style gets locked and loaded, perpetuating generational trauma down the road.

So, what about growing up with two emotionally unavailable parents or in a single-parent household who's abusive?

In a few words: It can be disaster.

If one parent is emotionally numb and the other is verbally, physically or sexually abusive to the child, neither parent can be present or available for that kid because one parent is out of touch with their own emotions, while the other is only concerned with their own emotions.

Exponentially multiply this scenario when it's an abusive single-parent household.

If the child has siblings to turn to, they may band together to try and support each other through the abuse. Or, it may turn into every kid for themselves.

If the kid is an only child or is sheltered or isolated, the probability of that kid getting out unscathed is nil.

If the only people that child has to turn to are avoidant, disconnected or neglectful, what message is that child hearing? Simple: You don't matter. You're invisible. Your feelings are irrelevant. You're not seen or heard.

If the kid is an only child of a severely abusive single parent and is also sheltered, the messages they're learning are that their existence is based on being a punching bag, a receptacle for their parent's dirty secrets, and that their life doesn't matter. They learn to fight their battles on their own. They learn hard and they learn fast that even family betray.

Typical red flag behavior includes:

We may not know how to make friends or may be afraid to bring friends home because of our parent's unpredictable behavior.

**The unspoken message learned:** We wind up living inside our head where overthinking, overanalyzing, and overapologizing become the norm.

We're taught survival; not life skills or self-love. "Duck and run" becomes the norm in our household.

**The unspoken message learned:** The word household replaces the word home. Falling asleep in the fetal position is safest; sleeping with a light on or the blinds open offers a false sense of security, and rocking ourselves to sleep offers comfort.

We may become severely withdrawn, further isolated from socialization and may become angry or act out.

**The unspoken message learned:** Coming across as cold, defensive, and aloof becomes our armor. The more negative and angrier we are or the colder we appear, the stronger our armor in keeping others out. We also learn to avoid those who find our armor as some "challenge" to accept, because they're only coming in as playing a "hero role" to stroke their Ego.

We may get misdiagnosed with Conduct Disorder, Oppositional Defiant Disorder, ADHD, or Autism.

**The unspoken message learned:** We become a label, a diagnosis, and more importantly—a misdiagnosis—to satisfy insurance claims, thus shifting parental blame back on us while they stroke their Ego, ass-deep in denial.

Choosing to disappear and hide from our abuser in our closet is seen as being autistic, or that there's something "wrong" with us.

**The unspoken message learned:** Safety doesn't exist; our closet becomes a pseudo-fortress protecting us from what's outside the bedroom door.

We can be shunned from our peers and not care because being alone with our thoughts is better than dealing with faux social circles.

**The unspoken message learned:** Many don't understand what childhood trauma is, including adults in positions of power such as teachers or social workers. Some are in it for the paycheck, while others received half-assed training. They may only see a "shy kid" instead of a child that is afraid of making eye contact, lacks a voice, and shuts down in any social situation. They only look surface-deep, instead of diving-deep. So, we adapt by learning to fake smile our way through our pain, while at the same time keeping everyone at arms-distance.

We may begin self-harming behavior (dangerous dieting, substance abuse, or other obsessions/compulsions or addictions as a way of self-numbing).

**The unspoken message learned:** We may have been taught to feel nothing or shamed for feeling pain. Dissociation replaces connection. Addictions replace emotions. We've learned to shut off pain or other vulnerable emotions by separating ourselves from our surroundings.

## From Disorganized To Organized

The reality can be grim for those grew up with two emotionally unavailable parents, or with a single parent who was severely abusive. We may have learned to abandon ourselves by turning to people-pleasing. Some have control issues because they're childhood was filled with chaos and left them feeling out of control. Some may become overthinkers where they are constantly trying to prepare themselves for abandonment or rejection.

I spent years sucking it up and "dealing" with childhood abuse. Some memories were misplaced under shame, anger, or guilt, and some were simply filed away as "Do Not Open."

When we grow up in a disorganized environment, part of healing comes in walking away from the fallout of our childhood. We may never get the apology we deserve, so we learn that their lack of apology is based on where they are in their own growth and has little to do with us.

We draw boundaries. And, we keep our distance from toxic people. We learn that even the "best intentions" of friends or family encouraging us to forgive our abusers isn't always sound advice. The fact is, "get over it", or "move on" aren't always reasonable or feasible.

We learn that we can't heal in the same environment or the same situations that caused us pain. We become more selective on who we let in, and who we give our energy to. No, it's not selfish. It's self-care.

We realize that manic energy, a need to always be busy, and surrounding ourselves with loud people or loud distractions are only bandaids, not solutions. Once we've come to this realization, we exchange loud, narcissistic and toxic agendas for quiet people who have emotional depth and quiet activities that are healing.

Through growth, and as a result of it, we learn our value. We learn to disconnect from old narratives and played-out agendas. And, in the process, we connect with our Self.

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<https://medium.com/invisible-illness/growing-up-with-two-emotionally-unavailable-parents-e0eab4220460>



## 4 EFFECTIVE WAYS TO BREAK THE GENERATIONAL CYCLE OF YELLING

by Ashley Patek

Aaaagggghhhh!!!

The howl escaped my lips - part she-wolf, part woman, part mother, part I-am-losing-my-shit.

I stood in the middle of the room, in front of my boys, and let the flood of frustration explode with an emotional intensity that far outweighed any event of the day. My chest was tight, my body felt hot, and my fists and jaw were clenched.

My yell was unconscious, leaving my body well before I even realized what was happening. As soon as my consciousness was able to catch up, my eyes grew wide and my hands immediately clasped over my mouth, almost as a desperate attempt to gather the scream I just exhaled and scoop it back in.

But I couldn't. It already happened. It was already out there. And my boys had already felt the sting of my emotional overwhelm.

As I saw their frames collapse with confusion and fear in their eyes, I too crumbled. The weight of my shame was crushing. In thirty seconds, I had become everything I had spent my whole parent life attempting not to be.

Right there, in front of me now, my sons looked a lot like I remembered feeling in my childhood home. I grew up with lots of yelling from my adults - yelling at us, yelling at each other, yelling to be heard, yelling to yell.

For a long time, I learned to stay quiet. The quiet one rarely gets noticed. The quiet one rarely gets yelled at. And that's when my self-abandoning began. That's the stage in my life where I lost my voice.

### BREAKING THE GENERATIONAL CYCLE OF YELLING

Let's back up to before my mama meltdown. My youngest son woke up in one of those moods. Everything was a power struggle. Everything led to alligator tears. Everything felt hard. And after a day of it, I didn't have it in me to keep it together any longer. I totally came unglued. See above.

I felt like such a wretch. Was I even worthy of these innocent, beautiful children I brought into this world? Currently, my answer was a resounding NO. (Yea, the self-critic in me is pretty intense, but that is a topic for another blog).

My boys are brilliant. They unapologetically feel what they feel. They express it with their whole body. They are everything that I was not allowed to be for so long.

I admire it and it sends my nervous system spiraling. I felt utterly out of control.

## 4 WAYS TO BREAK THE GENERATIONAL CYCLE OF YELLING

That night, I did a little exercise, and I am going to share it with you here. For me to become the pivot point for my lineage, I had to consciously choose to move downward and deeper. To hold a mirror up to myself and acknowledge my wounds with hopes of preventing theirs.

### 1. DO A TRIGGER WORKSHEET

With my boys now sleeping, I crawled into bed. I closed my eyes and thought back to my day. Using a trigger worksheet, I broke down what had happened.

**My trigger was** my son's day-long tidal wave of emotions. They came strong and hot from AM to PM.

**I felt** trapped inside my body, like a pressure cooker. I felt like I needed to release the pressure.

**I thought:** I am doing the best I can and it still isn't good enough.

**My goal for my son** is to stop - just long enough for me to gather my thoughts and breathe - long enough for me to feel safe.

**I cancel my goal that** my son stops feeling, being, or acting any particular way.

**I set a new goal for myself that** when my son's emotions tower over him, I will pause by counting to ten and then notice how my body feels.

### 2. MAKE IT MAKE SENSE

Okay, so there it is in plain sight. The explosive moment was dismantled. I acknowledged how I felt and labeled it in Step One. I already felt a bit better.

Next, I validated what I was feeling by telling myself a story about why it made sense.

It makes sense to feel the way I am feeling because as a child I was often denied the opportunity to express my thoughts, feelings, wants, and needs. I learned early on that the adults were right, I was wrong, and so that left little space for my authenticity. I wanted to yell, be angry, feel disappointed and share those unpleasant emotions with the adults in my life, but I couldn't because it threatened attachment. So I bottled it in. So, yea, it makes sense that I feel triggered by my child's emotions.

### 3. MAKE IT SAFE TO FEEL

I then gave myself permission to feel what I was feeling.

*I give myself permission to feel this feeling to the full extent I am feeling it.*

With my hands to my heart. I breathed this in, over and over again until I felt my body accept it.

### 4. APPRECIATE THE INNER CHILD

Often, we see our emotional wounds as things to fix. And yet, they are part of our fabric. They don't have to run our current or future narratives, but they did get us here, and for

that, I am eternally grateful. I have a deep appreciation for the parts of me that started out as helpful to my survival but are now in opposition to the changes I want to make. And so, with my hands holding my heart once again, I closed my eyes and said:

*There are reasons I am the way that I am.*

*And none of those reasons are because there is anything wrong with me.*

*My struggles today were adaptations during the years my brain was wiring for survival.*

*Thank you.*

*Thank you child-me who protected me for so many years.*

*You were so smart and were looking out for me.*

*Thank you for your years of service and you will always have a special place within me.*

## HOLDING THE CHILD WITHIN AND THE ONE IN FRONT OF ME

I went to bed that night feeling better.

In doing this exercise, I learned a bit about myself. More painful than being yelled at as a child was feeling like my parents didn't understand me, support me, or care about my feelings, thoughts, and needs. In my attempt to make it "fair" I turned all the hurt and blame and anger and everything I wanted to say to my parents in those child moments inward - my silent attempt for control. I realized that the reason it felt so good and regulating to my nervous system to yell now as an adult was because I was never allowed to as a child.

Fast forward a few days and we had one of those tricky days again, but this time I found myself approaching with more self-awareness and compassion - for me and my son.

As I felt my body's visceral response to what was happening, I closed my eyes and said: *This is me feeling triggered. This feeling has nothing to do with my son's big emotions and everything to do with an old narrative popping up.*

I recognized the sensations as a part of me that was literally yelling to be seen.

And so, before I validated my child, I validated the child in me.

*I see you are uncomfortable.*

*I see your tight fists and clenched jaw.*

*I am here. I am listening.*

*When I opened my eyes, I knelt down and did the same for my son.*

*I see things feel hard.*

*I see your tears.*

*I am here. I am listening.*

In that moment, I held two children, the one within me and the one in front of me.

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<https://genmindful.com/blogs/mindful-moments/4-effective-ways-to-break-the-generational-cycle-of-yelling?fbclid=IwAR37m0dp5mqY5uDKPojj4eqsGmdAsXoBdnqYVn0s-hrvjJTBXWSCszkzmz>

# IT'S SCIENCE. DROPPING NEGATIVE LANGUAGE IMPROVES CHILD BEHAVIOUR.

by ALANA PACE

We tend to underestimate how negative language impacts children. Find out why it is a less effective form of discipline, what research on neurobiology says about how to speak more effectively and find positive phrases to improve listening and misbehaviour. My three-year-old son can be strong-willed and vocal. But, most of the time, he is open to reason.

That all changed three weeks ago.

We had come back from celebrating Christmas out of town. As if playing Santa, (setting up a KidKraft dollhouse is no quick feat), packing up our two young ones and travelling wasn't enough, I am *very* pregnant. I mean pregnant to the point that people think I'm due **any** day even though I'm not.

Once home, my kids showed signs of being overstimulated from all of the holiday excitement. Sibling rivalry **consumed** our household. My daughter wanted space. And my son took that as a challenge to see how many buttons of hers he could push.

And I was bone-tired and resorted to parenting from the couch.

"Don't bug your sister."

"Stop it now."

"No, you can't jump from the coffee table to the couch!"

Soon, every time I got down to my little boy's level and opened my mouth, I was met with the word, "STOP!"

I took a step back and evaluated my approach.

I tried reacting more thoughtfully. In my mind, I was using every positive parenting strategy in the book. But he continued to stonewall me. I was at a loss.

Then, I had a lightbulb moment.

It took me way too long, but I realized the error of my ways. He was speaking to me the way he was being spoken to.

One morning, exasperated, I made a pact with my kids. "We're going to stop saying 'Stop.' And find ways to say yes to one another. So, if Mama says, 'Stop,' one of you need to remind me that we don't talk that way. If one of you say, 'Stop,' I will remind you."

Almost immediately, my children changed the way they were speaking. But the habit was much harder for me to break. To reinforce my pact to my kids, I dusted off some parenting books and did some research. This is what I found.

## How negative language impacts children

Research has shown that negative language is, in fact, ineffective.

The reason?

For young children, discipline worded negatively is much harder to understand.

'Stop' on its own tells a child **nothing**. He left to deduce what he shouldn't be doing and what he should be doing. For

preschoolers and toddlers, that's asking too much.

Now, some may argue I should simply add what my son should stop doing and the problem is solved. But doing this has inherent issues. You see, when I say, "Stop bugging your sister," I am requiring my son to double-process. Meaning, he must process what I have told him not to do and deduce what he should do instead.

In contrast, positive language is far more effectual because it tells children how to cooperate.



Common examples of negative language and alternative positive phrases

Don't run → Walk, please.

Stop touching your sister → Hands to yourself.

Don't throw toys → Please keep your toys on the ground.

Stop interrupting → I can see you want to talk to me. Wait one moment, please.

Leave him alone → Come over here and play.

Don't hit → Only gentle touches, please.

Stop yelling → Quiet voice, please.

Calm down → Take a deep breath. We can work through this together

You don't need another toy. I'm not buying that. → If that's something you really want, why not save up for it?

This is nothing to get upset about → I can see this is hard right now. Let's work together.

Additionally, positive language reinforces good behaviour, is clear, and shows thoughtfulness. This is because the parent is responding in a way that doesn't simply default to, "No," or "Stop." When we use the same phrases without much thought, our children are more likely to ignore us.

But it goes beyond that.



## The neurobiological reasons for using positive language

Double-processing aside, there are even more compelling reasons to use positive language. And it comes down to research on neurobiology.

In general, science finds that when a child (or anyone for that matter) is told no, their fight, flight, freeze or faint response is activated. In this state of mind, children are more likely to emotionally respond. The result is a child who likely feels angry, avoidant, rigid or helpless. In contrast, when a child hears positive phrasing, their prefrontal cortex, the area of the brain responsible for resilience, curiosity, open-mindedness, problem-solving and even morality is engaged.

Consider this example.

My little guy is splashing in soapy bathwater when I realize bedtime is fast approaching.

I grab his t-rex hooded towel and say, "It's time to get out!"

"No. I stay in the bath!" he declares.

My default would be to say, "No more bath," and maybe scoop him out of the tub. My son would scream, I would dress a damp thrashing toddler and wait out his tantrum.

But, I am equipped with this knowledge.

So instead, when my son says he's staying in the bath, I acknowledge how he's feeling.

"Oh my goodness! You're having the best time in the bath, aren't you?" By acknowledging his point of view, I'm getting him into a more agreeable state.

He nods. Then, I say, "I know you'd like to stay in here. It's time to get out now, but how 'bout we have a bath again tomorrow?"

He agrees.

But the benefits don't stop there...

Before responding, I pause, reflect and then respond. I no longer respond out of exasperation as much. By approaching both of my kids with more patience and a willingness to find a solution they were more likely to do the same.

Not only that, but in my efforts to use more positive phrasing, **I started saying yes more.**

For example,

No, you can't have a cookie → Yes, you can have dessert after dinner.

I can't play right now → Yes, I can play with you after I'm done writing this email.

I don't want a mess right now so no you can't make slime → Yes, you can make slime as long as everything is cleaned up once you're done.

And in turn, this acted as invaluable modelling for my children to be more flexible and say yes more too.

*Anything we give attention to, anything we emphasize in our experiences and interactions, creates new linking connections in the brain. Where attention goes, neurons fire. And where neurons fire, they wire or join together.*

– Dr. Daniel Siegel and Dr. Tina Payne Bryson

Based on the research from Payne Bryson and Siegel, by looking for ways to discipline my children in calm, positive and constructive ways, I'm helping wire their neurocircuitry in favour of that behaviour.

## A final note about dropping negative language in favour of positive phrasing

Does this mean you should edit everything you say or never use negative language again? Simply put, no.

In all honesty, there are times where "No. It's completely out of the question," or "Stop right now," are necessary and arguably more effective. That said, the more I strive to use positive language, the more I realize that the situations that demand "hard no's" are much rarer than I once thought. On top of it, the overall emphasis on using more positive language has paid dividends in our household. I notice my children are more resilient and less reactive.

As such, when I get off track, I will always come back to this approach as it is undoubtedly raising more open-minded children who have a greater ability to problem-solve.

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## THE LONG SHADOW OF CHILDHOOD TRAUMA

A long shadow is cast by childhood trauma because of its profound impact on the developing brain, an American psychiatrist says.

Dr Bruce Perry is an expert on the impact of abuse, neglect and trauma on the developing brain and the implications for clinical practice.

For three decades he has been an active teacher, clinician and researcher in children's mental health and the neurosciences, holding a variety of academic positions.

New Zealand pediatrician Dr Robin Fancourt led the way in this field, Dr Perry told Kathryn Ryan..

"Her work and the work of her colleagues including our group, focused many, many years ago on trying to understand how chaos, exposure to threat, domestic violence and other forms of abuse and neglect impacted the developing child."

This work showed that traumatic early experiences literally change the biology of the brain, he says.

"If you have a seriously distressing experience as an infant, and you are terrorised, or you feel as if you are in harm's way for prolonged time, your brain will literally turn on certain genes, it'll turn off other genes, certain neural networks will develop in a way that make them overactive and overly reactive even into childhood and in some cases into adult life."

"And the echo, that the long shadow, I kind of think of it as an echo because it's a little bit like dropping a pebble in a pond. The event may have taken place many, many years ago. But those echoes and the ripple effects can carry through into adult life."

The architecture of the brain is behind this, he says

"Envision the brain as an upside-down triangle. And the lower part, the bottom, people refer to it as the lizard brain, it's

the most simple, regulatory part of the brain, it does a lot of great things but it's not the part of your brain that's involved in thinking, it's really involved in reacting.

"The middle part of the brain is involved in interpreting information and giving it emotional value.

"Once you get to the very top part of your brain, the cortex, that's the part of the brain where you do your thinking, these uniquely human attributes of reflecting on something in the past or anticipating the future and making a plan."

However, the part of the brain that does the immediate processing is the lizard brain, he says.



"So, when you interact with somebody, the immediate response that your brain will have is going to be to non-verbal signals."

Such things as tone of voice, how close the person is standing, whether or not that person has attributes that are similar to people we know and trust, he says.

That information is then passed through the next ladders of the brain, the emotional and then to the rational cortex, Dr Perry says.

"The irony is during development the last part of your brain to organize and develop and function properly is your cortex, that top part of your brain.

"And that doesn't really fully develop until you're probably in your mid-20s to late-20s.

"So, the developing child doesn't have full access to that smartest part of the brain and by the time information gets to the smart part of your brain a lot of times it's been short circuited by misunderstanding or mislabelling."

That leads to conflict and distortion, he says.

"People who will hear the exact same thing but their brains will turn it into completely different arguments... and they'll walk away with a different understanding of what was just said and it's in part because of that sequential processing that starts with the lizard brain, which is the least rational part of us."

The lowest part of the brain has neurotransmitter networks that go from the brain, to every other part of the body, he says.

"They either go directly through neuronal connection, or

they go indirectly through hormonal connection.

"These systems, which are getting nonstop input from the outside world, and the inside world, kind of telling you what's going on, these systems play this uniquely important role in orchestrating and integrating function across your whole body."

When there is a prolonged pattern of stress activation or chaotic and unpredictable behaviour those systems start to become overactive and overly reactive, he says.

"That abnormality in activity starts to influence the development of higher parts of the brain, but it also starts to influence the way your heart works, and the way your pancreas works and the way your lungs work.

"And so over time, you have the probability of becoming increasingly vulnerable to physical disease, as well as social problems and mental health problems and learning problems."

Therefore, early development experiences determine the regulatory status of important neurotransmitter networks, and play a disproportionate role in shaping how we develop and how we function in later life, Dr Perry says.

Much of his work in the last three decades has been to determine what to do about the implications of early childhood trauma, he says.

"The first part of the brain that starts to shut down under threat is the cortex. And one of the fundamental things that we learned very quickly, was that if you try to teach a child who has an overactive stress response system, you can have the best curriculum and the best teacher on the planet, but it still won't get up to their cortex, it'll get short circuited by this active stress response.

So, we teach educators and students that before you try to use your cortex, before you try to reason with somebody, you need to be regulated."

Regulated means quieting the stress system and can be achieved through deep breathing or other physical exercises, he says.

"We will typically recommend that classes will start with two or three minutes of regulatory activity.

"Some places will use deep breathing, some places use music, some people use a large motor activity like jumping jacks."

Repetitive pattern rhythms are also an effective quietening strategy, he says.

"Traditionally for generations and generations and generations our indigenous communities have used pattern repetitive rhythmic activities as part of their educational practices, part of their problem solving process, part of their healing process.

"And it really reflects a certain wisdom and recognition that people can't think clearly and make good decisions unless they're regulated.

"So, before we make a big decision for the clan, let's regulate. Let's make sure everybody's fed. Let's make everybody sure everybody feels safe. Let's have a dance. Let's sing a song. Let's get everybody in the same space. Let's make everybody feel safe and connected. And then we'll make a decision."

We are able to recover from maladjusted responses, he says, the change is normally incremental and needs strong

relational bonds.

“We’ve found that most positive therapeutic change happens in incremental moments that are provided by the people in our life.

“And if you are lucky enough to have connection to community and culture, and family, that those interactions, the opportunities of a relationally wealthy life often provide the necessary elements for therapeutic healing.”

The modern world makes this healing difficult, he says.

“Because far too many of us live in relational poverty.

“We’ve moved away from our extended family, we’re not connected to a community of faith, we’re disconnected from our culture, we spend too much time in front of a screen, we have a small group of friends.

“And so the relational opportunities that are required to both identify our patterns that are maladaptive and to change them are frequently not there.”

Recreating healthy community has been an important part of his recent work, he says.

“To create connection in communities and let that natural healing component, the natural educational component of connectedness take place.

“And I think if we did that many of our issues around education and mental health and child welfare would be solved - not 100 percent, but significantly assisted.”

*Dr Bruce Perry is the principal of the Neurosequential Network, senior fellow of The Child Trauma Academy. He is a bestselling author and the co-author of The Boy Who Was Raised As A Dog.*

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<https://www.rnz.co.nz/national/programmes/ninetonoon/audio/2018829840/the-long-shadow-of-childhood-trauma>

[Update support group info](#)

## HOW USING SOCIAL MEDIA AFFECTS TEENAGERS

By Rachel Ehmke

*Experts say kids are growing up with more anxiety and less self-esteem.*

Many parents worry about how exposure to technology might affect toddlers developmentally. We know our preschoolers are picking up new social and cognitive skills at a stunning pace, and we don’t want hours spent glued to an iPad to impede that. But adolescence is an equally important period of rapid development, and too few of us are paying attention to how our teenagers’ use of technology—much more intense and intimate than a 3-year-old playing with dad’s iPhone—is affecting them. In fact, experts worry that the social media and text messages that have become so integral to teenage life are promoting anxiety and lowering self-esteem.

Young people report that there might be good reason to worry. A survey conducted by the Royal Society for Public

Health asked 14-24 year olds in the UK how social media platforms impacted their health and wellbeing. The survey results found that Snapchat, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram all led to increased feelings of depression, anxiety, poor body image and loneliness.

### Indirect communication

Teens are masters at keeping themselves occupied in the hours after school until way past bedtime. When they’re not doing their homework (and when they are) they’re online and on their phones, texting, sharing, trolling, scrolling, you name it. Of course before everyone had an Instagram account teens kept themselves busy, too, but they were more likely to do their chatting on the phone, or in person when hanging out at the mall. It may have looked like a lot of aimless hanging around, but what they were doing was experimenting, trying out skills, and succeeding and failing in tons of tiny real-time interactions that kids today are missing out on. For one thing, modern teens are learning to do most of their communication while looking at a screen, not another person.

“As a species we are very highly attuned to reading social cues,” says Catherine Steiner-Adair, EdD, a clinical psychologist and author of *The Big Disconnect*. “There’s no question kids are missing out on very critical social skills. In a way, texting and online communicating—it’s not like it creates a nonverbal learning disability, but it puts everybody in a nonverbal disabled context, where body language, facial expression, and even the smallest kinds of vocal reactions are rendered invisible.”

## NFAPA SUPPORT GROUPS

As Nebraska is opening up with changes due to COVID please contact the RFC in your area to see when support groups will be back up and running or continuing with an online support. Registration is required when meeting in person.

### CONTACT A RESOURCE FAMILY CONSULTANT FOR MORE INFORMATION:

**Jolie Camden (Panhandle Area): 308-672-3658**

- Virtual Support Group at this time. Available for all foster/adoptive parents on the first Tuesday at 6:30 pm (MT). Contact Jolie for Zoom information

**Tammy Welker: 402-989-2197**

- Virtual Support Group at this time. Available for all foster/adoptive parents on the second Tuesday of the month at 7:00 pm (CT). Contact Tammy for Zoom information.

**Terry Robinson (Central): 402-460-9177**

- One on one support or if you would like one started in your area, please contact Terry.

**Robbi Blume: 402-853-1091**

- FACES-Our online support group. Meets on Facebook Tuesday night at 9:00 pm (CT)

**NFAPA Office: 402-476-2273**

- Parenting Across Color Lines in Lincoln. Meets the 4th Monday of the month at Connection Point, 1333 N 33rd Street, Lincoln. Note: depending on COVID Risk Dial, it may go to a virtual meeting. Contact Felicia for information or the NFAPA Office.

## Lowering the risks

Certainly speaking indirectly creates a barrier to clear communication, but that's not all. Learning how to make friends is a major part of growing up, and friendship requires a certain amount of risk-taking. This is true for making a new friend, but it's also true for maintaining friendships. When there are problems that need to be faced—big ones or small ones—it takes courage to be honest about your feelings and then hear what the other person has to say. Learning to effectively cross these bridges is part of what makes friendship fun and exciting, and also scary. “Part of healthy self-esteem is knowing how to say what you think and feel even when you're in disagreement with other people or it feels emotionally risky,” notes Dr. Steiner-Adair.

But when friendship is conducted online and through texts, kids are doing this in a context stripped of many of the most personal—and sometimes intimidating—aspects of communication. It's easier to keep your guard up when you're texting, so less is at stake. You aren't hearing or seeing the effect that your words are having on the other person. Because the conversation isn't happening in real time, each party can take more time to consider a response. No wonder kids say calling someone on the phone is “too intense”—it requires more direct communication, and if you aren't used to that it may well feel scary.

If kids aren't getting enough practice relating to people and getting their needs met in person and in real time, many of them will grow up to be adults who are anxious about our species' primary means of communication—talking. And of course social negotiations only get riskier as people get older and begin navigating romantic relationships and employment.

## Cyberbullying and the imposter syndrome

The other big danger that comes from kids communicating more indirectly is that it has gotten easier to be cruel. “Kids text all sorts of things that you would never in a million years contemplate saying to anyone's face,” says Donna Wick, EdD, a clinical and developmental psychologist. She notes that this seems to be especially true of girls, who typically don't like to disagree with each other in “real life.”

“You hope to teach them that they can disagree without jeopardizing the relationship, but what social media is teaching them to do is disagree in ways that are more extreme and do jeopardize the relationship. It's exactly what you don't want to have happen,” she says.

Dr. Steiner-Adair agrees that girls are particularly at risk. “Girls are socialized more to compare themselves to other people, girls in particular, to develop their identities, so it makes them more vulnerable to the downside of all this.” She warns that a lack of solid self-esteem is often to blame. “We forget that relational aggression comes from insecurity and feeling awful about yourself, and wanting to put other people down so you feel better.”

Peer acceptance is a big thing for adolescents, and many of them care about their image as much as a politician running for office, and to them it can feel as serious. Add to that the fact that kids today are getting actual polling data on how much people like them or their appearance via things like “likes.” It's enough to turn anyone's head. Who wouldn't want to make herself look cooler if she can? So kids can spend hours pruning their online identities, trying to project an idealized image. Teenage girls sort through hundreds of photos, agonizing

over which ones to post online. Boys compete for attention by trying to out-gross one other, pushing the envelope as much as they can in the already disinhibited atmosphere online. Kids gang up on each other.

Adolescents have always been doing this, but with the advent of social media they are faced with more opportunities—and more traps—than ever before. When kids scroll through their feeds and see how great everyone seems, it only adds to the pressure. We're used to worrying about the impractical ideals that photo shopped magazine models give to our kids, but what happens with the kid next door is photo shopped, too? Even more confusing, what about when your own profile doesn't really represent the person that you feel like you are on the inside?

“Adolescence and the early twenties in particular are the years in which you are acutely aware of the contrasts between who you appear to be and who you think you are,” says Dr. Wick. “It's similar to the ‘imposter syndrome’ in psychology. As you get older and acquire more mastery, you begin to realize that you actually are good at some things, and then you feel that gap hopefully narrow. But imagine having your deepest darkest fear be that you aren't as good as you look, and then imagine needing to look that good all the time! It's exhausting.”

As Dr. Steiner-Adair explains, “Self-esteem comes from consolidating who you are.” The more identities you have, and the more time you spend pretending to be someone you aren't, the harder it's going to be to feel good about yourself.

## Stalking (and being ignored)

Another big change that has come with new technology and especially smart phones is that we are never really alone. Kids update their status, share what they're watching, listening to, and reading, and have apps that let their friends know their specific location on a map at all times. Even if a person isn't trying to keep his friends updated, he's still never out of reach of a text message. The result is that kids feel hyperconnected with each other. The conversation never needs to stop, and it feels like there's always something new happening.

“Whatever we think of the ‘relationships’ maintained and in some cases initiated on social media, kids never get a break from them,” notes Dr. Wick. “And that, in and of itself, can produce anxiety. Everyone needs a respite from the demands of intimacy and connection; time alone to regroup, replenish and just chill out. When you don't have that, it's easy to become emotionally depleted, fertile ground for anxiety to breed.”

It's also surprisingly easy to feel lonely in the middle of all that hyperconnection. For one thing, kids now know with depressing certainty when they're being ignored. We all have phones and we all respond to things pretty quickly, so when you're waiting for a response that doesn't come, the silence can be deafening. The silent treatment might be a strategic insult or just the unfortunate side effect of an online adolescent relationship that starts out intensely but then fades away.

“In the old days when a boy was going to break up with you, he had to have a conversation with you. Or at least he had to call,” says Dr. Wick. “These days he might just disappear from your screen, and you never get to have the ‘What did I do?’ conversation.” Kids are often left imagining the worst about themselves.

But even when the conversation doesn't end, being in a constant state of waiting can still provoke anxiety. We can feel

ourselves being put on the back burner, we put others back there, and our very human need to communicate is effectively delegated there, too.

### What should parents do?

Both experts interviewed for this article agreed that the best thing parents can do to minimize the risks associated with technology is to curtail their own consumption first. It's up to parents to set a good example of what healthy computer usage looks like. Most of us check our phones or our email too much, out of either real interest or nervous habit. Kids should be used to seeing our faces, not our heads bent over a screen. Establish technology-free zones in the house and technology-free hours when no one uses the phone, including mom and dad. "Don't walk in the door after work in the middle of a conversation," Dr. Steiner-Adair advises. "Don't walk in the door after work, say 'hi' quickly, and then 'just check your email.' In the morning, get up a half hour earlier than your kids and check your email then. Give them your full attention until they're out the door. And neither of you should be using phones in the car to or from school because that's an important time to talk."

Not only does limiting the amount of time you spend plugged in to computers provide a healthy counterpoint to the tech-obsessed world, it also strengthens the parent-child bond and makes kids feel more secure. Kids need to know that you are available to help them with their problems, talk about their day, or give them a reality check.

"It is the mini-moments of disconnection, when parents are too focused on their own devices and screens, that dilute the parent-child relationship," Dr. Steiner-Adair warns. And when kids start turning to the Internet for help or to process whatever happened during the day, you might not like what happens. "Tech can give your children more information that you can, and it doesn't have your values," notes Dr. Steiner-Adair. "It won't be sensitive to your child's personality, and it won't answer his question in a developmentally appropriate way."

In addition Dr. Wick advises delaying the age of first use as much as possible. "I use the same advice here that I use when talking about kids and alcohol—try to get as far as you can without anything at all." If your child is on Facebook, Dr. Wick says that you should be your child's friend and monitor her page. But she advises against going through text messages unless there is cause for concern. "If you have a reason to be worried then okay, but it better be a good reason. I see parents who are just plain old spying on their kids. Parents should begin by trusting their children. To not even give your kid the benefit of the doubt is incredibly damaging to the relationship. You have to feel like your parents think you're a good kid."

Offline, the gold standard advice for helping kids build healthy self-esteem is to get them involved in something that they're interested in. It could be sports or music or taking apart computers or volunteering—anything that sparks an interest and gives them confidence. When kids learn to feel good about what they can do instead of how they look and what they own, they're happier and better prepared for success in real life. That most of these activities also involve spending time interacting with peers face-to-face is just the icing on the cake.

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## IGNORING YOUR ADOPTED CHILD'S QUESTIONS DOESN'T PRESERVE THEIR INNOCENCE

By Maralee

I read this summary of a podcast interview with Thomas Rhett about the adoption of his daughter and I'm not okay with it. I don't want to pretend that this interview was a full description of how he's handling adoption conversations in his home. I want to give him the benefit of the doubt, but I also want to present an alternative narrative about how to handle these adoption conversations to anyone who is looking to Rhett as an example.

From the article:

"She asks questions all the time," Thomas, 32, told the Today co-anchor. "She talks to Lauren, like, 'When can we go see my friends in Uganda?'"

While Willa Gray's curiosity may be growing, Thomas admitted he's not ready to have a deep conversation with her about adoption just yet.

"You go, 'Well, what age is the right age?' The world is moving so fast that it's like, to have a conversation with a 6-year-old like that," he said. "Maybe I'm old-school that way but I'm like, 'Maybe we need to wait 'til she's 10.'"

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**Friday, June 10, 2022 - 6:00pm-9:30pm**  
**Saturday, June 11, 2022 - 8:00am-5:30pm**

The Spaulding program is offered to prospective adoptive families. Spaulding training offers families the tools and information that they need to:

- Explain how adoptive families are different
- Importance of separation, loss, and grief in adoption
- Understand attachment and its importance in adoption
- Anticipate challenges and be able to identify strategies for managing challenges as an adoptive family
- Explore the lifelong commitment to a child that adoption brings

## Friday, February 25, 2022 - 6:00pm-9:30pm

**1) Exploring Expectations**—Defining adoption, the process, and the key players. Participant's hopes and fears about the adoption process are recognized and empowerment strategies are identified to assist them in the process. Participant's explore their fantasies about children they might adopt to become aware of the possible influence on their decision about adoption.

**2) Meeting the Needs of Waiting Children**—Assist prospective adoptive parents in focusing on the needs of children awaiting adoption. Explore the issues of separation, loss, grief and attachment. Plus the unique issues related to parenting a child who has been sexually abused.

## Saturday, February 26, 2022 - 8:00am-5:30pm (with a break for lunch on your own)

**3) Exploring Adoption Issues**—Identify supports within their family and introduce them to common issues that all adoptive families face. Help develop strategies for dealing with these issues; explore crisis periods in adoption; explore their own strengths, needs and challenges as they consider adoption

**4) Making the Commitment**—Assist prospective adoptive parents in considering resources they may need, what they need to know, what they need to do, and what they need to explore about themselves as they consider adopting a particular child or children.

Register online at: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/SpauldingRegistrationJune2022>

You will be notified if Spaulding is cancelled due to low registration. Please note times/dates of the training (Central Time). Since this is a virtual training, you must have the ability for audio/visual and to have your camera on during the entire training and be able to see the PowerPoint presentation. Questions, please call 402-476-2273 or Toll-Free 877-257-0176

I would like to propose that we do not have to sidestep the truth of our child's adoption story. In fact, it may be more damaging the longer you wait to have those conversations.

It's a really nice idea that if we don't talk about it, we can preserve our child's "innocence". That somehow if we don't acknowledge the trauma that happened to them, it can't impact them. But that is ridiculous. The trauma already happened. Rhett's daughter (like my son) was adopted from Africa. Her adoption is an obvious fact to anyone who sees their family. She knows she's adopted. She has questions. She remembers her life before her current reality. You are not preserving her innocence not to answer the questions she's asking. You're preserving her ignorance. And she will likely resent you for it. Addressing the trauma our kids already experienced and already feel is the first step to helping them heal.



Adopted kids deserve the truth. They deserve it from the moment they enter your life. You whisper it over their cribs. You talk about it between kisses and bedtime stories. You speak of their first mom as you comb their hair. You answer every question as it comes up. You set the tone for those conversations before they ever need to happen by being honest, approachable and open.

So why do some parents think the right course of action is to kick that can down the road? I don't think it's about preserving a child's innocence. I think it's about our own discomfort and our own insecurities.

If I tell them the truth, will they not see me as their "real" parent? Will I have to watch them grieve? Will I have to talk about the ethics of adoption, or sex outside of marriage, or death, or poverty, or substance abuse, or any number of topics

that I don't like thinking about?

Kids know when they aren't being given the full story. When we refuse to answer their questions, they get the message that these questions aren't safe. It doesn't make the questions go away, it just means they learn you aren't a safe person to talk to. You may have "preserved their innocence" when it comes to the specifics of their adoption, but you are damaging something so foundational to their ability to heal from the trauma they've already endured— you're disrupting their ability to trust you.

When we truly center the needs of the child, it becomes easier to tell them the truth. It's not about me, it's about them and their story. I am the keeper of that story and my job is to make sure they fully know it and know they can trust me to tell them the truth. If that trust is damaged, my kids will have lost much more than their innocence. They will feel betrayed, lied to, disrespected. They won't know if they can believe me. In adoption, trust is unspeakably important. It is what allows our kids to attach and believe that we are for them. Trust is the foundation for our relationship when biology is absent. Giving our kids any reason to doubt our honesty means disrupting what we've worked so hard to build.

And by always telling them the truth, I believe we've lessened the traumatic impact of their story. They will not remember a time before they knew their reality. It will not come as a shock or change their view of themselves, their history, or the world. It is just a part of their story they have always known, even before they fully understood it.

So I will tell my kids the truth about their adoptions over and over again. I will answer the questions they're asking. I have pulled out paperwork and combed through it with a child who was ready to see it with their own eyes. I have said hard things and I have sat with my kids through their grief. Would lying have been easier? Would it have been nice to just tell them I'd let them know when they're older? Sure. For today. But I'm not parenting based on what makes life easy today. I'm taking the long view.

I'm sure there are ways I'm doing this wrong. As my kids get older I trust them to tell me. We don't know what we don't know. But for my kids, their adoption story will never be something that they don't know.

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<http://www.amusingmaralee.com/2022/04/ignoring-your-adopted-childs-questions-doesnt-preserve-their-innocence/?fbclid=IwAR3oPR44SnXT80MPEWh-B9Jkh6N1-oAEguR1nSIR8RfRwNVMGSe55HCIBII>

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