

section

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Strengthening Family Relationships
Part 4

Strengthening Family Relationships

part four

Developing Parenting Strategies and Positive Behavior Interventions

You may have heard the expression “to push someone’s buttons.” Everyone has certain topics, issues, or “triggers” to which they are sensitive. When someone is pushing your buttons, that means he or she is doing something that provokes a strong reaction.

It’s common in many families for parents and children to push each other’s buttons, especially during conflict, when emotions and stress are high. But knowing how to remain calm and avoid communication pitfalls during times of conflict are the key to strengthening family relationships.

Avoiding Communication Pitfalls

When communicating with one another, family members can make many mistakes that can damage relationships. We call these mistakes “communication pitfalls.” Making an effort to avoid these common pitfalls may help to enhance family relationships. When speaking with your child about a problem, keep in mind the following tips:

Describe the problem by giving information relevant to the present problem.

- Avoid blaming, accusing, or dredging up the past. For example, if your child forgets to put the milk back in the refrigerator, you can say “Milk turns sour when it is left out of the fridge” rather than “You’re wasting milk all the time”
- Be specific
- Use 10 words or fewer

communication

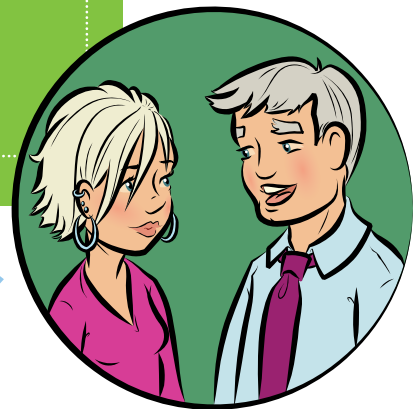
Describe how you feel about the problem.

- Be aware of your tone and expression. How you relay the information can often be directly related to your child's ability to understand it
- Use "I" statements when expressing feelings or providing feedback about a problem
- Be direct and confident when expressing your feelings about the problem—don't be "wishy-washy"

Address problems when you are both calm.

- Try to delay communicating or making decisions about consequences until you and your child have calmed down
- Pay attention to when your child seems most open to talk
- Consider writing a note to express your feelings or expectations if that is easier

The calmer the parent, the more meaningful the consequence.



be direct



buttons

Why Kids Attempt to Push Your Buttons

Children push buttons in an effort to try to have a sense of control or to get his or her parent's attention. Parents must be aware of that and be prepared. Parents can have just as many buttons as their children do, which can cause a defensive reaction when dealing with an emotional child. Understanding your own buttons can help to decrease conflicts. If you also identify your children's buttons and avoid them, you will decrease conflicts.

Here are some of the common ways that your child or teen may use to push your buttons:

- Using bad words
- Making you feel guilty
 - Example:** “If you really loved me, you’d let me go to the party”
- Making personal attacks
 - Example:** “I don’t know why I even speak to you. You’re too stupid to understand”
- Using fear
 - Example:** “You never let me do anything. Someday, I’m going to kill myself”
- Making you feel like you don’t have control
 - Example:** “You can’t tell me what to do. I’m not a kid anymore. You’re not my real dad. You can’t boss me around”
- Appealing to your personal insecurities
 - Example:** “You didn’t even graduate from college. What do you know about getting a good job?”

buttons

Identifying Your Child's or Teen's Buttons

Parents often unknowingly escalate conflicts with their children by pushing their buttons. Parents who can identify their child's sensitive areas can avoid unnecessary conflicts.

Here are some common buttons for children and teenagers:



Lecturing: This changes the focus from a child's concerns to the parent's



Talking in chapters: This phrase describes a parent's tendency to talk too much or overexplain when a short response could suffice. For example, a parent might use an example or experience from his or her own childhood to make a point to the child. While a parent vents his or her personal frustration, it may stir up a child's frustration



Expressing intolerance of a child's rebellious behavior and preferences: The child may become defensive in response to a parent's concern for his or her hair style, clothing, or taste in music, for example



Threatening a child with his or her future: This is called "future shock"

buttons

Common buttons for children and teenagers (continued)



Dredging up the past: This condemns a child for past mistakes



Labeling: Calling a child lazy, irresponsible, and inconsiderate, for example, inhibits and discourages further communication



Questioning or probing: It's important that you understand and convey the difference between questioning and interrogation. Questioning places a child "on trial"



Problem solving: It's better to solve problems after the child has had time to deal with unpleasant and hurt feelings. Recognize when the child needs emotional support and reflective listening. The child is more likely to accept responsibility for his or her actions and look at a problem objectively if the child believes that a parent is caring and understands his or her feelings

buttons

When Buttons Get Pushed

Button pushing is inevitable. When a child attempts it, be aware and have some strategies ready to defuse the situation.

- Be aware of the signs of low frustration tolerance. Signals that occur before a meltdown may include
 - facial expressions, verbal comments
 - physical expressions or gestures
 - mood changes
 - increased heart rate
 - flushed face
- Stay calm, do not engage
- Take a time-out
 - Let the child walk away and go to his or her “safe space,” such as a bedroom





damage control

Damage Control: Mending Fences

After a conflict, try to restore the relationship with your child as quickly as possible to prevent lingering resentments.

- Demonstrate your affection as soon as you can in person or in writing
- Use humor to break the tension
- Use distraction to help your child move on
- Go somewhere fun
- Practice compassion

Parents: Make a Plan to Keep Your Cool

When you are yelling at each other, no one is working on a positive solution. The real incident is no longer the focus, and it takes much longer to recover emotionally. When yelling starts, the communication stops.



Print this page!

keep cool

Here are some tips to help you keep your cool when you feel that your buttons are being pushed. Print this page out and keep it in a place where you will see it, such as on the refrigerator.

- **Stop and stay calm**

- Prepare a rehearsed response; for example: “I’ll get back to you on this later”

- **State your point and walk away**

- Keep it short and to the point; for example: “That’s the rule!”

- **Walk away**

- Tell the child, “I have to calm down,” or have your partner take over

- **Avoid telling your child that he or she is wrong**

- Instead, state “there is a disagreement that must be resolved”

- **If you are uncertain about how you want to respond to the problem, buy time**

- “I’m not sure what is best. Give me an hour to think about this”

- **Reassure your child**

- “If you listen to me, I promise to listen to you”

- **Just describe the problem**

- “The garage door was left open”

- **Use enforceable statements**

- “I will take you to the movies when you clear the table”

- **Say it with a written note**

- “Please remember to clean your closet”

- **Say it with one word or phrase**

- “Cat box” or “dishes”

- **Explain your feelings**

- “It makes me feel like you don’t respect me when you act like that”
- “I love you too much to argue about that”

- **Apologize**

- Set up an apology system for all
- If you do explode, be sure to apologize later



activity to share with your child

8



Print this page for your child!

pitfall puzzle

Every family has problems once in a while, but being able to communicate and work together to solve problems is what makes families strong.

In the puzzle below, Moxie needs your help to create a path to effective communication! Connect the dots that represent good ways to respond if someone is pushing your buttons. Be sure to avoid the communication pitfalls!



Asking the other person to just listen to me

"You're stupid"

"You can't tell me what to do"

"This is your fault"

Talking when I have calmed down

Writing down my feelings and sharing them when I'm calm



The answer key to this puzzle is on the next page.

pitfall puzzle

Answer Key



Asking the other person to just listen to me

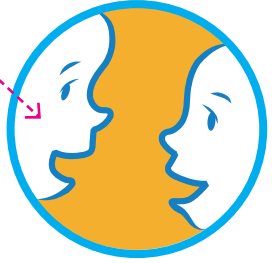
"You're stupid"

"This is your fault"

Talking when I have calmed down

"You can't tell me what to do"

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A series of horizontal solid blue lines providing a space for writing notes. There are ten lines in total, spaced evenly down the page.