



Practicing Patience is the Key to Non-Punitive Parenting

By Judy Arnall

Parenting is hard work! In no other job are you expected to work 24/7 and be responsible for a little person whose mind is still developing. Each day, we wake up and vow to be the parent of our dreams - the patient parent!

I recall one of my less-than-stellar parenting moments that I wrote about in the best-selling book on totally non-punitive parenting, *Discipline Without Distress*. To this day, all my children also remember it. I had a really bad day. I was under stress. I needed to get a handout ready for a class, and my printer wasn't working. At the time, I had four children under eight years of age. I was furiously trying to get the printer working when the two younger children started fighting. I yelled. I fumed. I threatened to put them in their rooms and take away the computer for a week. Completely frustrated, I took a hammer to the printer. The children were in tears, I was in tears, and the printer wasn't in great shape either. I felt embarrassed for demonstrating a very poor expression of anger in front of the children, and I regretted taking away computer time for a week.

I knew when I calmed down that the computer punishment would never be enforced. I teach about parenting without punishment and couldn't possibly punish my own kids! The printer and handout problems eventually were solved, but the relationship between the children and I was not repaired as quickly. Now that my kids are older, we laugh about that incident, which was

not one of my prouder parenting moments. Luckily, children's memories don't start much before four years of age, which is Mother Nature's way of forgiving parents during those really tough years of parenting small children.

On the flip side, we still have to be careful how we handle stress because children's brains record what they see, feel, and experience. Because we don't always agree with our family and we have needs that may conflict with the needs of our partners and children, strong emotions arise. We feel anger and frustration. It's a normal part of life and relationships. Anger is one of the hardest things to deal with in the family because of the perception that families must always be loving. But anger can be very productive.

As a wife for 25 years and mom of five children, three of who are now adults, I found myself getting angry quite a lot in their early years. Sleepless nights, messes, spills, destroyed items, children who don't listen, feeling unappreciated, and a rushed schedule can bring out the worst in normally nice people. As children grow, there are fewer and fewer issues to yell about, so parenting school-agers and teens becomes easier.

As a professional educator who teaches parenting and child development, I resolved to never punish my children and managed to do that for the most part. However, many times I yelled and went off on angry tirades. I threw things and broke a few others. I swore a lot. Thank goodness that no one is perfect.

I teach parents not to use physical punishment and many of us are not doing that any more, yet we resort to yelling and swearing which might be considered a form of emotional punishment. A *New York Times* article even went so far as to say that yelling is the new spanking. (Stout, 2009) A 2003 study published in the *Journal of Marriage and Family* found that parental yelling is quite prolific: of the 991 families interviewed, 90% of them admitted that they shouted, screamed, or yelled at their children at least once in the previous year. (Sutherland-Smith, 2013)

Although sporadic yelling probably doesn't cause children irreparable harm, we don't like it when we behave that way and we really hate it when our children copy us. We wake up each morning and hope for more patience. At night, we feel tremendous guilt when kissing our sleeping angels goodnight and remembering their scared little faces when we yelled at them during the day. We wonder what happened between the morning and the evening.

As children grow, two things happen; they become much more verbal and able to understand our words and hence “listen” more, and they become much more physically capable of navigating their own needs and lives. Those two factors make parenting much easier and the opportunities for yelling greatly decrease as children age. Patience comes easier.

So how to move forward? Start small. Practice just the first action step for a month and see how much calmer things are. Then try the next steps. You will be well on your way to more conscious and non-punitive parenting. Welcome to patient parenting!