

### The Must Have Survival Tool for Parenthood: Adaptation

Before my husband and I had children, I had absolutely no fear whatsoever about managing motherhood. I felt well equipped having worked in Montessori classrooms with children ages three to twelve years old and alongside child development professionals for over a decade. Through my work with the school, I was able to process the nostalgia of my own childhood, identify my style of behavior management, and experience my fair share of sleepless nights over strong-willed children that I tirelessly redirected day in and day out.

During that time I also completed my degree in Psychology, a process that revealed to me many things about my own temperament and the dynamics of interpersonal relationships, including that of mother and child. As an avid planner, I read all the parenting articles and books throughout my pregnancy. You could say I was literally as prepared as possible to be a mother – in theory.

Yet I never could have imagined what having my own child would be like and how challenging and taxing that relationship could be...particularly with a personality as strong and persistent as my firstborn, James. In all my careful calculations, I neglected to include two very important factors: the unknown of what James' temperament would be and the reality that there is no "end of the workday" in which to recoup and rejuvenate when you are the parent.

Parents are with their children all the time, even when they physically are not, they are thinking, problem solving, predicting, and planning for their child's success. There are no breaks or holidays from parenting. This fact not only makes it very difficult to uphold expectations and enforce all boundaries consistently 100% of the time, but attempting such can also drastically drain and deplete the parent. When resources are low, we tend to become "reactionary," no longer taking the time to thoughtfully process an appropriate response, but instead potentially lashing out with emotion that is often later regretted by both mother and child.

My three-year-old and I had gotten there. In the blink of an eye, too. It felt like one moment he was my precious, babbling, cooing "do-no-wrong" infant and the next he was a mobile force to be reckoned with, exercising his iron-clad will in every direction, defying all boundaries and taking charge of every circumstance. James had an unusually high persistence and emotionality that made redirecting him feel ten times more exhausting than a typical child.

Then, of course, there is the obvious difference between the role of teacher and parent, the emotional connection to my own child. As much as I loved all of my students, my love for James was so vast and deep, it would sometimes cloud my judgment and my confidence as his mother. When enforcing an expectation or managing a difficult meltdown, I would begin to wonder:

*Is he sick?*

*Did I give him enough warnings?*

*Did I explain it enough?*

*Does he understand?*

*Is he tired?*

*Is he hungry?*

*Did I overstimulate him?*

All the questions would haunt me as I desperately tried to maintain hold of whatever clarity I could muster in the moment.

Our pediatrician gave me my first home-hitting piece of advice. James had recently amped up his refusal of diaper changes, screaming, kicking, rolling his body like a roped alligator to avoid conforming to this basic hygiene necessity. I asked Dr. Banks what to do when a child reaches these new levels of defiance. His response?

*Adapt.*

His words have rung true ever since and I have constantly reminded myself to “adapt;” when bedtime battles rage, when tooth brushing becomes a tug-of-war on tooth decay, when dressing himself and getting in the car to go to school becomes a marathon of debate, when I can literally throw the parenting advice book into the fire because none of the tips and tricks contained within make a lick of difference to this Tiny Tornado - I remember it is my job to adapt.

Along the way, after many tearful nights, I have also picked up a few other tools that have aided our adaptation and evolution:

### **Ready Body Before Transitions**

How many things do you enjoy doing before you are “ready” to do them? Before making a big presentation, we like to have a little time to prepare. Before reconciling with a friend, we like to have some space and time to process our thoughts and feelings. Our children are no different. One technique I learned in the Montessori classroom is the concept of maintaining a state of calm emotional regulation we refer to as having a “ready body.”

When emotionality is high and your three-year-old is arguing circles around your sleep-deprived brain whilst your one-year-old is pulling the entire, open box of cereal off the shelf, it is easy to ride the tide of energy all the way to the nuthouse. Designating a place in your home for your child to “get a ready body” can be a lifesaver for navigating difficult transitions. This practice not only allows the child to participate in her own emotional regulation but it also provides an objective buffer between parent and child, discharging the negative energy that naturally builds during conflict or stress.

When your child is overwhelmed with emotion, there is no amount of verbal reasoning that she will retain while in a distressed state. It usually doesn’t take long for a child to recognize her negative emotions are going nowhere and to turn the tide toward receptiveness.

### **Make Objective Observations, Not Subjective Demands**

This is one I often forget in the heat of the moment. During all the years I worked in a classroom I never wavered on how to respond to a child’s misbehavior. How different the circumstances feel with your own child! James’ tantrums baffle me and it is obvious to him. If I make the redirection about my disbelief, or discontent with his choices, I may as well be RSVPing to a power struggle party. The key is to make an objective observation about your child’s behavior, stating it out loud to your child with neutrality and then providing a solution.

“I see two children who want the same toy. Everyone could play with the toy if we take turns using it. James, why don’t you take a turn and then Lane will have a turn next.”

### **Banking Time**

For a child as impulsive as James, the percentage of his day spent being redirected by either myself or his teachers at school sometimes ends up being more than his positive interactions. Oregon State University

conducted a study that tested the effectiveness of one-on-one, intentional, positive interaction between child and adult called “Banking Time.”

The study asserts, “Banking Time is...designed to foster sensitive, responsive interactions between teacher and a child, creating a relationship the child and teacher can use as a resource during times of challenge in the classroom.”

Repeated redirection is depleting and can dissolve trust. It is essential to be proactive with a child by building in intentional, positive interactions, so that when the negative inevitably occurs, the child is able to reference her positive experience “bank” and hopefully better cope with the redirection.

We accomplish this at my house by playing a board game with James before bed. My husband and I often split our time between the two boys, tag teaming their care. James gets one-on-one time with both his dad and me, but it is mostly individually. Rarely ever does he get to do an activity with both mom and dad’s undivided attention and without little brother also tagging along. Our game times accomplish intentional bonding, positive relationship building, and it is a focused period for academic skill development as well, since his games usually involve some form of mathematics. It is also a great opportunity to practice following rules and turn taking.

Each of these, at different times, has worked wonders for our ever-evolving relationship as mother and child. When I have all but reached the brink of my own “positive experience bank” and I begin to question every decision I have made as a parent, these are the basic tools to which I return. They have become anchors that re-center and refocus our energy into a more enjoyable experience with one another. But it isn’t always that easy.

And that’s when I return to “Adapt.”