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## Family Focus Calm, Assertive Parenting

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upon their children.

Here are a few tips for being a calm, assertive parent:

- Take time to think about what you want to say and do. Words can be quite hurtful and damaging. Parents may think a simple apology will smooth things over with their children, but they take a risk. In my therapy practice I see teens and adults who remain wounded by words uttered in their families many years ago.

- Use "I" messages. Telling a child, "I'm really furious at you right now," or "I feel very hurt by what you just said to me," or "I'm so upset right now, I don't know what to say," are all good ways to express yourself initially.

- Separate yourself from your child if possible when you sense the situation is escalating.

- Some children and teens respond best to a written dialogue rather than a verbal one. Ask your child if he wants to e-mail or pass a notebook back and forth to air feelings and discuss issues.

- Try to discover the underlying factors contributing to the conflict. Children often don't connect their behavior to causal events and they need your help trying to interpret and understand.

For example, one set of parents came in to get help in dealing with their defiant, uncooperative, and uncommunicative 17-year-old son. Jacob wasn't putting effort into school, household chores, or in getting along with his sister or parents. His only concerns seemed to be his friends and playing video games.

In working with Jacob and his parents, we uncovered the source of his poor attitude and behavior: Jacob was extremely discouraged about his poor performance in his math class. At first he tried to do well in the class, but he didn't succeed. So Jacob decided that it was no use trying very hard in any of his classes since he probably wouldn't do well anyway. By assuming this attitude, he protected himself from further disappointment and pain. When his parents became angry that he wasn't putting effort into his studies, Jacob rebelled by refusing to communicate or cooperate with them.

Once Jacob felt understood by his parents, he was able to accept their emotional support and even consider a math tutor. His parents were encouraged to find out that Jacob wasn't purposely trying to make their lives miserable, but that he had been suffering silently with a mixture of confusing emotions.

Being a dog lover, parent, and therapist, I can't help but see occasional parallels between human-dog relationships and parent-child relationships. In both cases, the preferable "leader" behavior is to be calm and assertive.

After a few therapy sessions with parents and their children, I can practically become a fly on the wall for a short time and observe their interactions. Often a parent becomes provoked and begins to lose his or her temper. This reaction can occur for a variety of reasons: a child refuses to talk, a child is defiant and disrespectful, a child persistently challenges a parent's version of incidents, or a child loses his or her temper.

A parent facing any of these responses from his child has every right to feel frustrated and angry. However, the idea of calm, assertive parenting is to accept that you have a right to feel a certain way internally, but to avoid expressing these feelings externally. This approach requires rational thought, self-control, and lots of practice.

Before we look at what is needed to be calm and assertive, let's look at the negative implications of behaving in the opposite way - in a volatile and aggressive manner.

Parents who consistently lose their temper:

- Can trigger hurt, anger, frustration, anxiety, depression, and lowered self-esteem and self-confidence in their children.

- Often feel guilty afterwards and may try to compensate for their angry outbursts by doing or buying too much for their kids.

- Set a negative example for their children of how to handle frustration and anger.

- Discourage their children from communicating in positive ways with them, setting the stage for continued anger and possible alienation.

- Feel like bad parents, despite all the otherwise wonderful and loving words and deeds they may bestow

-If stress is a problem in your family, look for ways to reduce it for all family members. Carve out quiet times with all electronic devices off, fun times together, and relaxing family meals. Building up good will among family members is vital for those times when conflicts inevitably arise.

-And last, but extremely important, try not to take your child's words and actions personally. This is where I often see parents becoming very hurt and angry. Children say and do so much without thinking, and they learn early on how to push our buttons. Since they sometimes feel uncomfortably dependent and powerless in the family system, they try to retaliate when they are angry and don't get their way, or when their pride is wounded. It is our challenge as parents to model the behaviors we want our children to ultimately absorb.

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