



Pushing The Emotional Buttons



The other day I asked my daughter to pick her clothes up off the bathroom floor and either put them neatly away or in the wash basket. The following day I noticed the heap of clothes was still on the floor. I said nothing and waited. I waited the next day and the next and watched the heap grow bigger. Finally, after a particularly tiring day at work, I came home to find the growing heap of clothes still on the bathroom floor. I exploded and a torrent of emotional lava poured out in one almighty eruption. Why could my

simple request have not been carried out when I asked? My daughter went into defence mode and I ended up feeling guilty and ashamed of my outburst.

Children know just how to push those emotional buttons. If I'm honest there have been many times over the years when my four children have each 'pushed my buttons' in different ways. Sometimes I feel I've handled the situation well, at other times I know my response has been because of the way I was feeling at the time. Children normally tend to try your patience when you are exhausted, either physically or emotionally, or trying to cope with a lot of things at once. An insensitive request or irritating behaviour can quickly send you over the edge and stretch you to the end of your tether.

Can we stop children pushing our buttons? Can we as parents stop our feelings rising to the buttons being pressed? In all honesty, no I don't think we can. Children are always going to try our patience when we are at our most vulnerable. I've even witnessed adult children pushing the buttons of elderly parents. We are not unemotional robots. Anger, hurt, frustration, annoyance, irritation are all part of our emotional make-up as human beings. They are, in part, what makes us human and as such it is not wrong to have those feelings. Is there a way then we can deal with these situations and prevent those feelings developing into an action we later regret?

There is no one certain 'be all and end all' answer. Learning to recognise patterns of behaviour and situations where you know things could quickly disintegrate into anarchy and attempting to stop the cycle can help. For example, children may come home from school tired or they may have had a bad day and start to display behaviour which they know from experience will 'wind mum up.' This may not be a conscious decision; rather they are reacting out of their own emotions and how they are feeling at the time. Sometimes they know what they are doing is wrong but just can't help themselves. Mum may have also had a trying day and her response to her child's behaviour will in turn be informed by her emotions. This cycle of behaviour and responses can continue and become almost the accepted 'norm.' Little Johnny always behaves like that and mum always responds in that way. Little Johnny may have also learned that pushing certain buttons will produce a certain response; that's why, consciously or unconsciously, he does it. Sometimes the response itself is the desired outcome.

Breaking patterns of behaviour is never easy but unless we can stop the cycle the wheel will just keep turning. Being able to step back from the heat and emotion of the moment is paramount, but will take a great deal of strength and will-power. Ask yourself, 'Why did the child behave like that, what is the real cause of it?' 'Why did his behaviour produce those feelings in me?' 'Why did I react that way?' Understanding is paramount. Talking to a child about his/her behaviour and discussing how it made mum feel is essential. It is not wrong for a child to comprehend the effect his behaviour and conduct have on mum and other members of the family. In fact it is crucial that he understands the reactions which his behaviour may produce in others if he is to form relationships both at school and in the adult world.



Listening to the child's concerns and feelings is equally important. One thing I have learned from experience is that it is easy to assume certain things and view things from your own angle without giving any consideration to the other person's viewpoint. What you assumed to be their perspective may not actually be their experience at all. We are all prone to judge things out of our own perception but if we stand in someone else's shoes, even for a while, we may gain insight into a completely different world from our own. (Watching the film 'Freaky Friday' with your teenage daughter may help with this!)

With all of my four children I have tried to help them understand each other's responses to situations and why, because of their different temperaments and personalities, they all respond differently. It isn't easy and at times I have hit a brick wall with the stronger and more stubborn temperaments. I persist until I know that, although they may not admit it, the truth of what I am sharing has registered.

I sat with my daughter and we were both able to share our own perspectives on the growing pile of clothes on the bathroom floor. What came out of our discussion was that there was a need for increased communication from both of us; which may help to prevent that particular button being pressed in the future.

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