

“But How Do I Stop Snapping and Screaming at My Kids?”

“**B**ut how do I stop snapping and screaming at my kids?” asks Mo, pressing his palms into his thighs to keep his discomfort from spilling all over his living room. Two minutes before Mo raised this question, he was sharing with me which aspects of his faith he wanted to pass down to his children. “But by the time I get home from my second shift. . .,” Mo swept both hands down and to his sides, painting his exhaustion in the air. Then, a loud-yet-familiar scream erupted from behind the couch. Three, two, one, Mo and I looked over our shoulders to find baby Fahad chewing on his three-year-old sister, Zainab’s, ear. Mo sighed, face palmed, chuckled, and shrugged, all within 0.03 seconds.

Like Mo, you might be trying to pay bills while breaking family cycles while trying to sign up for your child’s playgroup at the library (before the registration closes at 5 PM). You want to give your child the childhood you wish you had. Or you want to make them feel seen, heard, and loved without a shadow of a doubt. And yet getting triggered and losing your cool gets in the way of meeting your child’s needs and nurturing their resilience.

When these reactive habits take the driver's seat, your parenting intentions and values also take a back seat. But, when you intentionally respond to your child instead of reacting, you raise your child according to your intention and practice liberation at home together. This is when parenting becomes a practice of resistance and liberation. Let's begin our social justice parenting practice in this chapter by managing our parenting triggers.

“Transforming reactions is a revolution. Responding intentionally to our children is an act of resistance.”

Putting your social justice values into practice asks for so much intention when your attention is pulled in millions of directions. But it's a whole new ball game when you have tiny apple sauce-covered hands tugging on your shirt every 10 seconds asking why raisins are wrinkly. These hands are also experts at knowing exactly which parenting buttons to push to activate your emotional triggers.

When Fahad and Zainab tag team to push Mo's parenting buttons, he immediately goes from being strict and stern to snappy and screamy. If you'd like to do a quick check-in with yourself, how many of these reactivity patterns show up when you feel overwhelmed by all the parenting “should”s and worn out by your child's demands? (Check all that apply):

- Snapping and sounding like your parents even though you promised yourself to never say those things to anyone, especially your child.

- ☑ Finding flaws in your child to fix.
- ☑ Bracing your body, gritting your teeth, trying to swallow the scream until it's sour in your mouth.
- ☑ Feeling “why bother?” and turning off your emotional presence and bearing down to “get the kid fed, bathed, and tucked in” mode.
- ☑ Burying yourself under busy activities (flittering from one item on the to-do list to the next feels more manageable than “being” and “feeling”).
- ☑ Doing it all, doing it well, and hating it all while doing it (rocking it at work, keeping the house spotless, patiently waiting for your child to “pick their outfit” before heading to school, making home-cooked meals, and volunteering at the soup kitchen too).
- ☑ Throwing caution to the wind, abandoning boundaries, bidding farewell to consequences. Doing whatever your child wants to get their meltdown to stop.
- ☑ Feeling frozen and disappearing into the background while your child runs the house.

Whether you've checked a few of these boxes or you've cringed just going down the list, please know that these reactivity patterns are extremely common. They are versions of what many well-intentioned, competent, bad-ass caregivers have shared with me over the past two decades. You're in good company.

What Does It Mean to Be Triggered?

TL;DR: It means you have a nervous system. A nervous system that's doing its job to protect you.

Being triggered is your nervous system sounding an alarm. If this alarm could talk, it would say (pardon me, scream) “danger, danger, danger. . . stop all the thinking and caring! Let's get ready to fight, flee, freeze, fix, people please, or shut down our way out of this threat! Code Red! Code Red! Code Red!” This so-called threat can be real or perceived: a tiger, racism, Covid-19, your boss's constructive feedback, or your child coming in for a hug when your tank is dry. And the volume of this alarm? Picture a drag brunch and a child's birthday party are happening in the same tiny room (it's loud). The only sensible thing to do then becomes doing what you need to do – no matter the cost – to turn the alarm off. The patterns above are some of the ways we frantically react, slamming that snooze button on an internal danger alarm instead of calmly responding and pressing the off button.

Being triggered means your nervous system is doing its job to protect you. It detects an echo of something that hurt you before. Then it sounds the alarm. It's been doing the same job with no paid vacation leave for the past 500 million years.¹ Under threat, you're ready to fight or flee. No questions asked. This protection mode is very efficient.

¹<https://wnorton.com/books/9781324016274>

But it's not effective when you react to your child asking for 15 more minutes on their iPad like you're fighting off Shao Khan and his army from Outworld. Whether or not you're a Mortal Kombat diehard like me, you know that when you're triggered, your noble parenting intentions are useless. Triggered, our priority becomes survival. Our intention to connect with our children and meet their needs goes out the window, at least until we re-center ourselves and shift from reacting to responding.

To shift from automatically reacting to your child to intentionally responding to them, I have two invitations to share with you. First, know what your reaction looks like. Second, know where your nervous system is: protection mode or connection mode. There's no need to throw a lab coat on or dust off your high-school biology textbook from Wiley. We'll break it down together.

Invitation #1: Mapping Your React–Revert–Reduce Cycle

Getting triggered is like an itch. Reacting is like scratching the itch right away without thinking. Scratching can feel so satisfying in the moment. But anyone with a mosquito bite will tell you that scratching will only make the itch worse. More thoughtful alternatives to scratching include patting, applying lotion, or using a cold compress. These alternatives are like intentional responses to the itch instead of a knee-jerk reactivity. You might still decide to scratch. But you know you have options. And it's easier to choose other options besides scratching when you see your own chain of behaviors in slow motion.

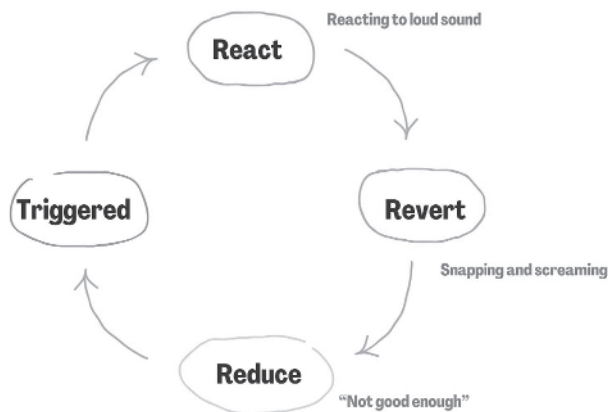
“Like Neo dodging the bullets,” Mo shared, describing his “aha!” moment when I first invited him to map out his react–revert–reduce cycle. “Neo from the Matrix. Leather suits and sunglasses. . . the Matrix,” continued Mo. The nerd in me almost saw the glowing green lines of code running vertically behind his eyes. But Mo didn’t need Neo, the Oracle, or anything but his own observations to map his cycle.

- *React*: Mo often gets overwhelmed and thus triggered by loud sounds, especially at the end of the day when his cup is dry as a single dad. But that’s when Fahad wants a lot of attention from Zainab. Zainab is I’m-too-cool-to-play-with-trains years old. So, the two siblings engage in an intense screaming match followed by a high-pitched meltdown right around dinner time. Mo waits for the oven alarm to go off so everyone can eat dinner together. But his internal danger alarm had already gone off and sent him into a reactive state of mind six minutes ago.
- *Revert*: Mo turns off the equally intense internal danger alarm by reverting to his tried-and-true relationship strategy that has made him feel secure, stable, and in control again. He charges forward, takes control of the situation, and fixes the mess. Mo had to over-learn these strategies as the eldest child of five in an immigrant, working-class family. These strategies – echoes from the past – are easy to pick up again, just like riding a bike. Now, as a father, Mo reverts to taking control of the situation by controlling Zainab and Fahad. Of course, Mo’s Google Calendar

doesn't have an alert to remind him to snap and scream at his children at 5:45 PM. It isn't intentional; it's reactive.

- *Reduce*: Three seconds after losing his cool, guilt and regret turn a sharp “not again” into a dull shame. “See? I’m not good enough to be their dad,” is what this shame does to reduce Mo’s brilliance into one tiny label. It’s as if it were written with a permanent marker: “not good enough.”

When Mo put this automatic sequence on paper (see the diagram below), snapping and screaming didn't magically disappear overnight. In fact, Mo saw his habits with honesty. He sat with the printout for another beat. Just another beat for the bitterness of his discomfort to blend with the sweetness of hope. For the first time, Mo no longer felt stuck in this cycle of reactivity. It was worth breaking the cycle to set something in him free.



Perhaps, mapping out your own cycle also makes it feel 10% more possible to pause and respond intentionally to your child instead of habitually reacting to them. If you'd like to play with this invitation, I have the following prompts to help you map out your own react–revert–reduce cycle:

1. What overwhelming experiences are you reacting to? Get specific about what pushes your parenting buttons. Some possible experiences are:

a. Your child's behaviors when they're asking for either connection or independence.

Connection: Hugging, feeling scared or distressed, leaning against you, asking you questions, feeling bored or indecisive, and needing your input and presence.

Independence: Saying no, disagreeing, refusing cuddles, wanting to try new things on their own, wanting to “help,” not listening to your requests, not doing what you asked them to do right away, slamming their bedroom door.

b. Your child's specific words, sounds (sigh, grunt, tongue clicking, childish/baby-like whines).

c. Your child's gestures (eye roll, not looking at you, shrugging, a certain look).

2. What tried-and-true relationship strategies are you reverting to? These strategies have consistently made you feel safe and protected in relationships in the past. Over-learned and over-used, you can execute these strategies

in your sleep. So, when you have to turn off your danger alarm as fast as you can in the heat of the moment, you immediately and unintentionally revert back to these trusted strategies. Some of these strategies might be:

- a.** Snapping and yelling to remind your child who's the boss around here. Somewhere in your history, you've learned that being small is safe. You want to keep your child safe by controlling them into obedience.
- b.** Nagging, managing, and fixing your child to behave, look, and sound perfect. Somewhere in your history, you've learned that being excellent brings you respect. You want to make sure your child is seen by shaping them into perfection.
- c.** Pushing your child to hustle and work hard to come out on top. Somewhere in your history, you've learned that independence and productivity guarantee security. Providing "value" also guarantees being valuable. You want to make sure your child can survive the Hunger Games of Capitalism by pushing them to persevere.
- d.** Shutting down your emotional presence, numbing out the chaos of family life, and paring down to just the essential caregiving tasks to get everyone tucked in safely with full bellies. Somewhere in your history, you've learned that taking care of other people was safer than feeling everything that was going on inside you.
- e.** Giving in to your child and giving up your own authority. Somewhere in your history, you've seen

how power was misused and how dominance and control rear their ugly heads. You don't want your child to experience that same pain. This people pleasing in parenting might have your child running the house because you're afraid of running your child over.

3. What labels are you reducing all your humanity into? What labels do your inner critics apply to you to "motivate" you to know better, do better, and be better next time?

While this cycle keeps you safe and protected from feeling overwhelmed, it also keeps you from connecting with your child as the caregiver you know you can be. Breaking this cycle requires pivoting from reacting to responding to your child. Responding to your child requires moving from survival mode to connection mode.

Invitation #2: What's Going on in the Body When You're Triggered?

"Trauma compromises our ability to engage with others by replacing patterns of connection with patterns of protection."

—Stephen Porges

To show up as the parent you know you can be – compassionate, curious, courageous, caring, and connected – you need to be in the just-right headspace.

In this just-right headspace, you're present and engaged with your child. Although the to-do list is long and the stress is there, it feels manageable. The laundry from four days ago can wait. That crayon-scribbled "unicorn" on the wall? No big deal. Let me calmly redirect my Little Basquiat to our makeshift easel. Where's my "Parent of the Year" trophy at? In this moment, you're probably feeling centered enough to feel compassionate, curious, courageous, caring, and connected with yourself as well as your child. Because of this groundedness, your parenting is mostly aligned with your values because your actions match your parenting intentions.

This just-right headspace shows that you're in connection mode, not in protection mode. While our brain can do many marvelous things at the same time, it can only be in one of these two modes at a time.

In connection mode, you're in a headspace where you feel safe enough and centered enough to put your parenting intentions into practice. This particular headspace goes by many names. When you dive into the literature, you might see names like the Window of Tolerance,² used by Dan Siegel³ and Pat Ogden⁴; or the Social Engagement System aka the Ventral Vagal, used by Stephen Porges of Polyvagal theory⁵; or the upstairs brain, used by Dan Siegel.⁶ We'll nickname it our "bandwidth."

²<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0269881109354930>

³<https://drdansiegel.com/book/the-developing-mind/>

⁴<https://wwnorton.com/books/9780393706130>

⁵<https://psycnet.apa.org/record/2011-04659-000>

⁶<https://drdansiegel.com/book/the-whole-brain-child/>

When you're in your bandwidth, you have what you need to see your child's needs for what they are. The baby's fussy because they didn't nap, not because they don't like you. Or your child is waking up at night more often because he's adjusting to the new classroom transition, not because he's out to get you. In your bandwidth, you have the juice to meet those needs well. . . most of the time. Even when your child is negotiating for 10 more minutes on your phone, you're able to take a deep breath, ground yourself, and intentionally respond to your child: "I know it's hard to put the game down. It's time for dinner. Let's go nourish our bodies."

However, you and I are living under white, colonial, capitalist patriarchy, where our food, housing, and healthcare can disappear the minute we stop working for our employers. When we have to navigate the violent impact of this systemic oppression daily, many of us are operating in survival mode where we fight, flee, freeze, fix, people please, or shut down as a baseline.

To survive any danger (whether it's a tiger or racism or transphobia), your body moves you out of connection mode and into protection mode. You shift from "best" mode to "beast" mode. Your body's survival intelligence has a motto: "stay ready so you don't have to get ready." To live by this motto, thinking and caring go offline. There's no time to contemplate the nature of human connection or critique capitalism. Instead, you breathe faster to get more oxygen and blood flow into your muscles, preparing your body to fight, flee, fix, freeze, or people please your way out of danger. Neurobiologically speaking, you have

no access to your beautiful parenting intentions or the well-researched mutual-aid strategies you read about last night. Your intention, motivation, and willpower are out the window because you're no longer in your Window of Tolerance (or your bandwidth). Trying to act out your parenting intentions when you're in protection mode is like asking your preschooler to remember what they did yesterday at the park while they're at the peak of a meltdown.

In protection mode, you're no longer in your neurological bandwidth where you feel safe enough to care, to be curious, to be compassionate, and to be connected to yourself and your child – to be the parent you know you can be. That's why your child's behaviors, which typically don't bother you, suddenly become irritating. (Where did that Little Basquiat go?) Your patience for their negotiation tactics (“one more candy, please. . .”), which are usually cute, runs real low.

Protection mode is like that auntie or friend you have who means well. Their timing is just off. We love them but we don't need them to be around ALL the time. As we look at our survival habits to better understand them, please note that I'm not advocating for you to get rid of them. Please do what you gotta do to survive systemic oppression and get through the day. I femme up, straighten up my accent, and codeswitch like no one's business every time I interact with an immigration officer. I'd break into a cartwheel, a dip, a cha-cha, or a pirouette if they wanted me to (and I can't even pronounce “pirouette”). Dignity who? Survival come through!

Survival mode certainly has its place. That place is just not on the couch while you're safely snuggling with your child. It's also not when you're trying to awkwardly apologize to your child for accidentally misgendering their new friends. When you'd like to practice liberation with your child, you lovingly invite the survival-mode strategies to leave (bye, auntie) to make room for your social justice actions.

That's why – before you write your own Social Justice Parenting Playbook – it's important to get back in the right headspace, to be in your bandwidth, and to be in connection mode. Once thinking and caring are back online in this connection mode, you'll have the bandwidth you need to realign your parenting with your values and show up fully as the parent you know you can be.

The most powerful things to help us stop yelling at our kids are . . .

Accessible childcare, affordable healthcare, and paid family leave. I just want to hop on my glittery soapbox again to reiterate that individualistic self-care can only go so far to address systemic issues. We'll chip away at these policies too as a part of collective care. Meanwhile, your tiny change agents are approaching 18 every day (I know, I'm sorry for that reminder). Let's break your outdated react-revert-reduce cycle now while the oppressive systems are being dismantled.

How to Break the React–Revert–Reduce Cycle?

“I regulate my nervous system so I don’t ‘regulate’ my child’s humanity.”

Getting back in the right headspace or back in your bandwidth means:

- Step 1. Taking a beat to pause *before* you react (snap, scream, shut down, numb out, people please, check out).
- Step 2. Re-centering yourself and finding your footing in connection mode again.
- Step 3. Choosing how you’d like to respond to your child. . .

If only things were this clear-cut in parenting!

What these three steps usually end up looking like in the beginning is you’ve just lost your cool and scratched that itch. You reacted. However, instead of just moving on, you pause (step 1). Then, you do what you need to do to re-center and return to your connection mode (step 2). And then you reconnect and repair with your child (step 3).

Kachi, a self-described Star Trek superfan and foster parent to Mae (four years old), scratched the itch and reacted to Mae’s 56th request for candy before dinner. Kachi and Mae have been talking a lot about loving our bodies in all shapes, colors, and sizes. And one way they practice this value at home is by nourishing

their bodies with colorful food, learning about where the food came from, and giving thanks to the land and the farmers. However, that afternoon, Kachi's bandwidth was already drained from work. Besides, the wheelchair ramp was "doing the most at being the least helpful." Kachi exhaled the leftover exhaustion from that day. Mae, of course, had also been "full of life" the entire bus ride home from preschool pick up. So, Mae's requests for candy finally pushed Kachi's buttons. They reacted and reverted to their go-to coping strategy: people pleasing. They gave in to Mae's request and gave her one candy because they didn't have the energy to handle her meltdown. Consequences for Mae's behavior were out the window. So was the intention to love and nourish the body.

Like many caregivers, I'm sure you've been where Kachi was. You "pick a battle" and get through the day with the little bandwidth you have left as graciously as you can.

After dinner, Kachi's bandwidth was recharged enough for them to be back in their connection mode (step 2). "Full belly, full epiphanies and downloads." Kachi fiercely snapped their fingers, sending the butterfly charms wrapped around their wrist voguing. Their smile was cute and confessional. Kachi quickly realized that they and Mae were both a little hangry. Kachi snuggled up next to Mae who was playing with her farm animal set. Together, they revisited their original plan to nourish their bodies with colorful vegetables and protein first before enjoying some candies. Mae agreed to pick snacks for the bus ride home that Kachi would pack for both of them each morning (step 3). This way they could enjoy their snacks together on the bus and avoid being hangry.

What Kachi and Mae show us is that, in the beginning, you might practice these three steps “in hindsight” after you already reacted. Over time, with more reps in and more oops made, many parents share that they catch themselves quicker right before they lose their cool. Our task in raising change agents is never about avoiding getting triggered. Rather, it’s honoring our own conviction and returning to connection mode over and over again when we engage with our children. Deb Dana,⁷ a clinician specializing in polyvagal theory, wrote: “In fact, it is our ability to recognize when we move into a place of protection and find our way back into connection that is the hallmark of resilience.” Right there in your bandwidth again, you can respond intentionally to your child. . . most of the time. Right there, you become both a responsive caregiver who promotes your child’s development and a rebel who refuses to apply “the master’s tools” in your own home.

Invitation: Hello Connection Mode aka *Coming Back to Care*

In the next chapters we’ll explore in detail a menu of ways to respond to your child that you can adapt and experiment with (step 3). But right now, let’s unpack four options you can play with to pause (step 1) and return to your connection mode (step 2).

⁷https://www.soundstrue.com/products/anchored?srsId=AfmBOopkNE1ihxSuT0ogCtazhpVhpBGLtFhGGIkG5winyEL_miHdoK5G

These options are not self-care hacks to address your individual burnout. You don't need a better breathing technique; you and I need a better (eco)system of care that supports our humanity so we can breathe.

These options are not for you to calm down. Not calm. Centered. Centered enough to be cunning, to choose what's right for your values and your child's development. Centered enough to meet the systemic violence with all the ferocity that you have.

These options are self-talk, choosing a safe word, body grounding, and self-reflection.

Option 1: Self-Talk

Danielle reacts to her baby's cries by reverting to stuffing her feelings down, doing what needs to be done, while resenting it. "Then, I throw myself a pity party and regret becoming Luke's mama." Danielle draws the whole react-revert-reduce cycle in the air with one hand while the other is distracting Luke with a giraffe rattle during his tummy time. What triggers this whole cycle is when Danielle feels "touched out" by Luke's constant demand to be held, rocked, shushed, rinse and repeat. "It's ridiculous how hard I fought to have him and now I feel swallowed whole by motherhood." Danielle recounted all the IVF treatments she went through. Her body – from the ligaments in her arms to the arches of her feet – remembered. Danielle's parental leave is almost up. She would like to be intentional with baby Luke as much as possible before returning to the Hunger Games of Capitalism.

Danielle is practicing the pause when rocking Luke is about to become resentment.

“Who resents their children, except for those who suffer in the scarcity manufactured in this capitalist economy?”

—*Dayna Lynn Nuckolls, the People’s Oracle*⁸

During this pause – this two-second gap between feeling touched out and reacting by shutting down – Danielle uses self-talk to re-center herself. She closes her eyes and takes a deep inhale like that breath only belongs to her. On the exhale, she recites a quote from Prentis Hemphill:⁹ “Boundaries are the distance at which I can love you and me simultaneously.” When she opens her eyes, she hands her baby to her mother-in-law and walks out of the room.

Does it make her fatigue go away? No. But Danielle is no longer a passive victim who gets caught in the automatic cycle of getting triggered one minute and then shutting down the next. She took a beat, paused, and came back to her connection mode. With her thinking and caring online again, she responded to her own need for space – out of love for her baby – by tagging in another pair of loving hands to rock the baby. In the beginning, Danielle felt deeply ashamed of “not being tough enough to tough it out” and for “leaving her baby.” Now Danielle’s sense of “I don’t want to leave my baby” is still there

⁸<https://thepeoplesoracle.com/>

⁹<https://www.instagram.com/p/CNSzFO1A21C/?hl=en>

like a gentle whisper. But her self-talk grounds her in the loving awareness that being full of self isn't selfish. Grounded and centered, Danielle is intentional about responding to her trigger. The guilt from asking and receiving help is still there but not overpowering. It lingers like Luke's shampooed head on the third day. More importantly, Danielle did not feel ashamed.

Other self-talks include:

- "I'm enough."
- "We got this."
- "This too shall pass."
- "My ancestors are with me."
- "Lord(e), give me strength." (As in Audre Lorde or the Lord, whichever is your ministry.)
- "Not today, ____." (Insert your favorite term, depending on your sass level.)

If you have your go-to self-talk, self-affirmation, or a spell, I invite you to take a moment to say it out loud, write it down, or take a mental note. Not for self-improvement; for self-reclamation.

(I'm over here snapping my fingers, nodding, and cheering you on!)

Option 2: Safe Word

Another option to help you take a beat and return to your bandwidth is to choose a "safe word." "Pineapple," "Barnie,"

and “Blurrrrg” are my favorite safe words families, children, and teachers have shared with me.

I’ve seen a mom texting “taco” to her friend. Twenty minutes later, this friend was washing the baby bottles in the kitchen. One safe word sent like an SOS. Help arrived, no questions asked (and it wasn’t even Taco Tuesday). This way mom could take a beat, re-center, and return to her bandwidth after a few moments to catch her breath.

Sometimes we don’t have 20 minutes to spare to come back to our connection mode. The itch must be scratched. The internal danger alarm must be muted. Joanna and Lennie’s story below might spark some ideas that you can play with for your safe word.

“Mama, vol-ca-no. . . monster,” uttered Joanna’s nine-year-old. “Volcano monster” is the family’s safe word that Joanna and her kiddo, Lennie, picked together after watching the animated film, Moana. Joanna and Lennie had agreed to use “volcano monster” as their safe word to remind one another to come back into their bandwidth. When Joanna gets overwhelmed, she reacts and reverts to her trusted strategy of “fixing” – or what Lennie lovingly calls acting like a “manager.” This manager in her survival mode is speeding through the household to-do list, moving from one task to the next and getting snappy and passive aggressive when Lennie moves at their own pace. Lennie would call Joanna in with “volcano monster.” With this safe word, Joanna would pause (sometimes reluctantly), check in with her bandwidth, and move the tasks that can wait to tomorrow’s to-do list. On the flip side, Joanna compassionately uses this safe word when Lennie gives her the signature “Gen Z

eye roll” before fully understanding why Joanna needs them to pick up their school uniform and put it in the laundry basket. With this safe word, Lennie would finish the eye roll, sigh, and try their best to be emotionally present with what Joanna has to share.

By having this shared language to call each other in, Joanna shows Lennie that she trusts them to exercise their agency and bring their voice to participate in family decision-making. In return, Lennie learns that it’s okay to feel feelings with those they trust and move through those feelings together. Lennie shared with me that “my mom teaches me that being real in our home is more important than being polite and bottling my feelings up inside. It’s just the two of us in the city so I like that we can be real with each other.”

That’s the Joanna–Lennie method. What’s yours?

Option 3: Body Grounding

Sometimes, pausing before reacting requires you to take the elevator from your brain back down to the body; from thinking to feeling. Many caregivers use breathing techniques, body tapping, gentle movements, fidget items, or sound cues to remember to pause.

“Put your oxygen mask on first *before* helping others.” That’s exactly what these body-based strategies are for. The energy of the fight–flight–freeze–fix–people please protection mode gets used and digested to help you come back into connection mode. Hold on, please suspend the eye roll. I know how ridiculous it might look when you start humming and rocking your body while your child is body noodling on the floor, screaming

hurtful words at you, and dumping all the blocks out of the box. Humming and rocking your body aren't a magic spell to stop your child's meltdowns. They are for you to take a beat and come back to connection mode. In connection mode, you have the bandwidth you need to meet your child where they're at from a centered place of your dignity. And yet, it's still hard to leave your child hanging while you're taking care of yourself.

That's why my actual invitation is for you to put your oxygen mask on *with* your child. First, you have "the talk." Then, you walk the walk together.

"The talk" isn't the "birds and bees" talk; it's the bandwidth talk. When you and your child feel safe and centered, you might share with them your plan to stay centered when they push your buttons and things get heated.

Sylvia,¹⁰ a Korean American mother of two bi-cultural and bi-lingual mixed-race children, shares: "I think it's also important to communicate with your children the things that you are doing and you'll be surprised how receptive and accepting they are."

This was how Sylvia had the "bandwidth talk" with her 10-year-old: "The reason I'm breathing is mommy is trying to catch her breath. Cause I've been running nonstop. So I can create room to connect with you. Mommy's trying to relearn how to connect with you. So when I breathe like that, it's not because I have comments about you. It's me trying to take a break and maybe once I get used to doing it, I'll find a different way to do this. But at the moment I need to do this."

¹⁰<https://www.comebacktocare.com/episode-38>

Sylvia's 10-year-old surprised her when he replied, "I know, mom, I know you're trying."

That's the Sylvia method. If you'd like to rehearse "the talk" together, I often invite caregivers to write their own version of this prompt: "It's not you, it's me. So, help me help you."

For example, "I'm trying this new humming and rocking my body thing I read about, so I don't end up snapping at you and having to apologize after. I just want to loop you in. When you hear me humming and see me rocking side to side like this, I'm taking care of my body and staying grounded. So that I can be present with you and keep my cup from running dry. Wanna try it together?"

Now that your child knows what to expect, you "walk the walk." In the heat of the moment, you might pause, rock your body, hum, or whichever strategies ground you. Once you're a bit more settled, perhaps you talk to your child and describe what you're doing. Many parents told me that narrating what they're doing out loud eases the awkwardness of doing a body-based practice and keeps their children from giving that perplexed look. More importantly, describing how you're taking care of yourself and showing how you're managing your big feelings are both powerful models to your child. Social emotional resilience? Check!

Aireen,¹¹ the second-generation Filipino American matriarch of her beautiful bi-racial family, discusses how she walked the walk with her four-year-old daughter: "I'm by no means perfect,

¹¹<https://www.comebacktocare.com/episode-49>

but I know I have the tools. I can parent with confidence knowing I have the tools in my back pocket. So if I'm activated now, I'll immediately start breathing. I will rub my chest and my stomach. I will say out loud to my daughter what I'm doing. 'Okay, mommy needs a couple minutes to just (using a hand gesture to convey settling down), all right, I just need a couple minutes. Okay?' She'll let me do it. Sometimes she'll come over by me and participate with me. Other times, she's like, 'okay, I have to, I better steer clear.'"

Both Sylvia and Aireen added different flavors to how they had "the talk" and how they walk the walk with their little ones. I know you'll add your secret sauce to yours too.

A spell, safe word, and body-based exercise are some options for you to pause and re-center instead of automatically reacting to your child. One last option for you to consider is a question.

Option 4: Self-Reflection Question

When you're feeling irritation and overwhelm rising, you might already ask yourself: "What do I do?" "What in the world is happening?" Then, you might rush to throw 5011 strategies at the wall like spaghetti and see which one sticks. These questions are reactive, not responsive. Although there's a time and a place for these reactive questions, this invitation is for you to ask yourself a reflective question that helps you pause and be intentional about your next moves. Curiosity can be another powerful invitation to pause before reacting.

A few questions I've heard most often from families in my care are below:

- “If these strangers weren't judging me and my screaming child, what would I do to support my child through this meltdown?”
- “What would (my abuela/ancestors/folks you look up to) say?”
- “What's my child actually communicating underneath all this hitting/throwing/biting/screaming?”

In the Social Justice Parenting Playbook (which we'll describe in Chapters 5 and 6), you'll explore another self-reflection question: “What do I want my child to know right now: how to be survival smart or how to be liberation smart?”

Whatever questions you choose, I invite you to notice how answering these questions might slow you down. Just enough to see your child for who they are in that moment instead of who you think they should be. Just enough for you to return to your connection mode and make the next parenting decisions that are right for you and your child.

Practicing Social Justice Parenting When You're Triggered and Tired (But Trying)

Snapping, yelling, checking out, numbing, shutting down, and people pleasing are all valid reactions to survive under white,

colonial, capitalist patriarchy. As Dr. Pauline Boss¹² puts it, “we cannot pathologize normal reactions to a pathological situation.” Without paid parental leave, universal childcare, and other accessible support, you might only have enough bandwidth left to care for your child from survival mode.

And yet here you are exploring ways to work with your emotional triggers and return to your connection mode. Against all the odds, you resist repeating oppression in your home. You’re breaking free from automatically reacting to your child and using “the master’s tools” like control and domination. You’re transforming your relationship with your child into a site of resistance, where liberation is no longer an intention but an action. It reminds me of this medicine from Chinese American activist and philosopher Grace Lee Boggs:¹³ “Transform Yourself to Transform the World. . . to see our own lives and work and relationships as a front line, a first place we can practice justice, liberation, and alignment with each other and the planet.” This tenacity to keep practicing social justice at home, even when you’re triggered and tired, is a power that the oppressors can’t take away.

Next, we’ll unpack an important dilemma many families have shared with me about raising change agents. How do we raise change agents while protecting them from the violence under systemic oppression?

¹²<https://www.apa.org/news/podcasts/speaking-of-psychology/ambiguous-loss>

¹³<https://www.ucpress.edu/book/9780520272590/the-next-american-revolution>

