



by Karen Stephens

## Specific Ways to Avoid Losing Your Cool With the Kids

“12 alternatives to whacking your kid.” That’s a catchy poster title, don’t you think? I saw it posted in a Head Start program. It starts out, “When the big and little problems of your everyday life pile up to the point where you feel like lashing out — stop. Take time out. Don’t take it out on your kids.”

I like the sound of that. It’s humane and encourages parents to think before we act.

Any way you look at it, whacking is the wrong way to any end. Scaring kids by losing control and inflicting pain doesn’t make them more sensitive, honest, or cooperative. Kids who are hit become confused and distracted. They grow a chip on their shoulders the size of a boulder. Or, instead of cocky and defiant, they become pitifully withdrawn and secretive.

It’s hard for battered kids to be optimistic or to believe in fairness and happy endings. Their ability to choose wise behaviors, or avoid repeating the same misbehavior, is crippled. They focus more on the fear of reprisal than on how to make amends for misdeeds. When hit, what kids focus on is their fear and the sting of pain. Their thoughts are not on behaving, but how to escape or stop the hitting as fast as possible! And then later, they plot revenge.

Since whacking doesn’t come to any good, the catchy poster I mentioned suggests a different tact: “Try any or all of these simple alternatives, whatever works for you.” Ah yes, alternatives. That’s what frustrated parents need. Quick, simple ways to de-escalate anger so furious feelings dissipate and become manageable.

To preserve our self-respect, and the innocence of kids’ tender hearts, parents must stop irrational anger in its tracks — before it has a chance to take shape. The shape of anger, I warn you, is appalling. Telltale reminders of primal impulses linger for weeks to mock. They start with ugly purple and blue bruises, gradually fading like watercolors into haunting patches of muddy yellow and sickly green — like a tornado sky. These remnants of broken blood vessels, left in the wake of our anger, stain little children’s pliable, soft skin.

Choosing alternatives to whacking your kids is downright logical. Like folk wisdom preaches, prevention is always worth a pound of cure. Following is the poster’s 12 alternatives, and a few of my own. I hope they get your own coping ideas percolating. Post this list on your fridge or in the car, wherever you most often find yourself frustrated with the kids. Perhaps the visual cue will remind you to bridle violent impulses. I don’t know a child who wouldn’t heartily agree that it’s worth a try.

### “12 alternatives to whacking your kid.”

*by the Wisconsin Committee for the Prevention and Treatment of Child Abuse and Neglect*

1. Stop in your tracks. Step back. Sit down.
2. Take five deep breaths. Inhale. Exhale. Slowly. Slowly.
3. Count to 10. Better yet, 20. Or say the alphabet out loud.
4. Phone a friend. A relative. Even the weather.
5. Still mad? Punch a pillow. Or munch an apple.
6. Thumb through a magazine, book, newspaper, photo album.
7. Do some sit-ups.

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8. Pick up a pencil and write down your thoughts.
9. Take a hot bath. Or a cold shower.
10. Lie down on the floor, or just put your feet up.
11. Put on your favorite record.
12. Water your plants.

Okay, that's their 12. Here are some more. But before you try them, make sure your child is somewhere safe while you take your time out. While you cool off, they can be cooling off in their bed, crib, or reading chair.

13. Take a warm, soothing shower. Breathe in the soap's scent. Imagine all your anger going down the drain with the soap suds.
14. Sit alone and blow bubbles. Imagine them carrying your frustration off to the treetops.
15. Get your child's play dough out. Close your eyes and knead it into shapes, focusing on the calming sensation.
16. While you wait out a child's tantrum, sort through old CDs or books for resale.
17. Regain a sense of control by organizing a bathroom or kitchen cabinet.
18. Call a friend to come over and massage your shoulders.
19. Dig dirt in garden space. Drop a seed in. Now, do like some Native Americans. Pour your anger into the hole so it can fertilize the seed.
20. Go to a private room and jump up and down on bubble wrap packing material.
21. Pull or hoe weeds, hard. Feel productive as you work off aggression.
22. Exercise on a bike or rower. Even vacuuming sweats off some anger.
23. Write your major beefs on paper. Graphically describe your feelings. When done, tear up your list and symbolically release their hold on you as you drop the confetti in the trash.
24. Read a quick inspirational quote from your favorite source. Copy it until you calm.
25. Chant as long as you have to: "This too shall pass. This too shall pass."
26. Tell yourself you're not alone; you're not the first adult a child has driven up the wall. Affirm that you will survive it with dignity.
27. Use your anger as a wake-up call. List things that could prevent the incident next time.
28. Pause for a reality check. What are you really mad about? Who are you really mad at?
29. Call a bookstore or visit the Internet to order one of these books:
  - *Kids, Parents and Power Struggles: Winning for a lifetime* by Mary Sheedy Kurcinka (New York: HarperCollins, 2000).
  - *Raising Your Spirited Child* by Mary Sheedy Kurcinka (New York: Harper Collins, 1991).
  - *Easy to Love, Difficult to Discipline* by Becky A. Bailey (New York: William Morrow, 2000).
  - *The Challenging Child* by Stanley I. Greenspan (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1995).
  - *The Difficult Child* by Stanley Turecki (New York: Bantam Books, 1989).
30. Pick up the phone to join a parent support group at your place of worship or work.

And if none of those ideas work, and you're about to lose control, try the following:

31. Call your local crisis hotline and talk out your anger with an adult. Ask for a referral to a family therapist.
32. And if you're really almost over the fine line, ask the hotline if your community has a Crisis Nursery. They provide short-term temporary care for children until a parent regains control so the possibility of child abuse is past.

**About the Author** — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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