Why kids press your hot buttons & what to do

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Have you noticed how your kids will behave one way to you but not to your partner. They may whine at you to get what they want, but they wouldn’t do the same to your partner.

Maybe they’ll cry for your partner when they have done the wrong thing, but they won’t cry for you as they know that tears won’t work.

As the good TV professor Dr. Julius Sumner-Miller would say, “Why is it so?”

Kids tend to keep the behaviours that work in terms of getting a desirable response from adults, and discard those that don’t get a response. This may sound like a devious plot, but it’s just human nature.

The Austrian psychologist Alfred Adler calls this ‘purposeful behaviour’. That is, kids like adults, repeat the behaviours that get a response and discard those that don’t work. Adler advised parents not to ask why a child behaves or misbehaves in a certain way but to ask, “What’s the purpose of a child’s behaviour?”

And the purpose is usually tied up in your response. So the purpose of a child’s whining may be to get a parent to give in; similarly, tantrums are a form of emotional blackmail aimed at getting parents to giving in.

There’s a simple test you can apply to check the notion of purposeful behaviour. If your child always whines at you, but he doesn’t whine to his or her teacher then it’s a fair chance that the whining is aimed at breaking your resistance...... it certainly does for me as whining is definitely a ‘hot button’ of mine. I can’t stand it.

Most misbehaviours fit under one of four broad purposes –

1. to get attention or be noticed;
2. to show power or regain control;
3. to hurt you or make you feel guilty;
4. to make you give up or lower your expectations of children.

(For more information on the four goals of misbehaviour check out my book One Step Ahead.)

We all have ‘hot buttons’ that kids will press to make us feel guilty or to get a little control back. One
of my children was expert at making their mother feel guilty....... because guilt was quite a hot button for her. She’d only have to say......“but you don’t really love me.........” to have her mother second-guessing a decision she made.

I obviously don’t have a very big guilt gland because she never tried to squeeze mine!

Sometimes our ‘hot buttons’ will reflect long held views about parenting, and we simply over react when kids misbehave. Some parents have strong views about parenting and will over react when even the mildest of words is uttered by a child.

These types of hot buttons can make family-life hard work as everyone tends to walk on eggshells to avoid pressing that buttons hot buttons.

Here are some ideas to help you respond when kids ‘press your hot buttons’:

1. **Recognise what gets you upset or gets a response that kids want.** ‘Hot buttons’ always get a strong emotional response, including annoyance, anger and feelings of hurt.

2. **Avoid the first impulsive reaction when kids misbehave.** As a great deal of children’s behaviour is purposeful don’t react impulsively when kids behave poorly. Stop and think what may be going on. Think, “Is this behaviour for my benefit?”

3. **Respond differently. If the behaviour is for your benefit, try something different.** Perhaps take the wind from the sails of a child who squeezes your guilt gland. Respond to “You don’t love me........” with “You know you could well be right.” Alternatively, smile and give a child a kiss saying “I love you though” and show that the comments have not impact.

4. **Get a reality check.** Sometimes we over react to kids or have extreme views that kids will take advantage of, or that make family life hard work. Check with a partner or a friend to see if your views are healthy. I know I had an unrealistic view of bedroom tidiness for a time, which my wife reminded me wasn’t really in line with my child who was messy by nature.

If a child continually presses your ‘hot buttons’, then recognise that you may not be able to change your child, but at least you can alter your response to their button-pressing. Kids don’t act in a vacuum so they are less likely to behave in ways that get the response they want.................at least that’s how the theory goes!

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