

MGH Faculty Parents Group: What to do When Your Kids Push Your Buttons

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“How do your kids push your buttons?” At a recent meeting of the Faculty Parents Group, this question was asked and everyone had at least one example to share. Here are just a few:

- A. When my son calls his sister “stupid.”
- B. When my child suddenly thinks of 13 things she needs to tell me, just when she should be putting on her coat to walk out the door (and we’re already late!).
- C. When my child refuses to put effort into music practice.

The main theme of all these experiences is that our kids say or do something that makes us go into auto-pilot and become emotionally reactive. Furthermore, when our kids push our buttons, we tend to make assumptions about what this behavior means for their future, their character, and our own parenting. We invited parent coach **Danya Handelsman** to speak with the Faculty Parents Group and help us understand what is happening in these situations, and how to diffuse our reactions and change our perceptions.

Two main themes came out of this discussion: first, the need to understand our own agenda and how that might differ from our child’s agenda; second the need to more fully understand our assumptions, and strategies for changing those assumptions.

Agendas. If you think about a time when your child pushed your buttons, and think about what your agenda is/was at the time, it often becomes clear that your child is following a very different agenda from you. Each individual’s agenda includes everything on our mind, whatever is demanding our attention, and our own expectations and standards. These agenda components may be very different for parent and child, and additionally, children’s temperament and stage of development factors into their agenda. In example B above, the parent’s agenda may be getting to work/school on time, while the child’s agenda is needing additional time and connection with the parent in the morning. In that example, the two agendas might both be met by getting up a bit earlier so there is more time for conversation in the morning. Ms. Handelsman recommends that parents remind themselves that, “my child’s agenda is just as important to him as mine is to me.”

Assumptions. Ms. Handelsman pointed out that often our assumptions about button-pushing situations cause us to have an overly harsh reaction, and moreover they are usually based on fears, not reality. Some typical assumptions when our buttons are being pushed are: my child is manipulating me, my child might grow up to be a criminal/sociopath, my child is lazy. As a way of helping us think about assumptions, Ms. Handelsman suggested that we try to think about the roots of our kids’ behavior, and in difficult situations remember that “the child is having a problem, not being a problem. One strategy to help re-frame negative assumptions is to keep

a journal where you write down positive things about your child and positive things about you as a parent.

Members of the Faculty Parents Group found this seminar extremely useful, especially the “real-life examples from other parents,” the “concrete strategy and researched framework,” and “thinking about assumptions and reframing.”

For additional information on this topic, see these suggested readings:

Book: When Your Kids Push Your Buttons, by Bonnie Harris

<http://www.amazon.com/When-Your-Kids-Push-Buttons/dp/0446692859>

Book: Playful Parenting, by Lawrence Cohen

<http://www.amazon.com/Playful-Parenting-Lawrence-J-Cohen/dp/0345442865>