

Emotional Safety

Call it spirited, stubborn, determined, or persistent. Whatever word you use to describe that quality, my daughter has it. While this trait will serve her well later in life, for now it is nothing but hair pulling to parent. Let's take last Saturday as an example. It was clean-up day at our school. Families are invited to help teachers get their classrooms ready for the start of the school year. When it's time to get ready to go, our daughter announces, "I am NOT going!" Grace proceeds to display her usual acts of protest – shutting herself in her room, not getting dressed, etc. It was the end of summer and after three weeks of camp mommy, I quickly lost my patience. Instead of trying to understand why she was feeling so adamant, we went straight to "Get dressed and in the car or else."

As we pull onto the street and turn the corner Grace makes the decision, unbeknownst to us at the time, that there is no way on earth she is going to the clean-up. How do I know this? Easy. She proceeds to unbuckle from her car seat and opens her car door, ready to jump out into traffic. Needless to say, all hell breaks loose. Terrified, my husband quickly pulls the car over. He gets out of the car to make sure Grace stays in the car. He slams shut her car door so hard I think it's going to come off the hinges. Obscenities could be heard far and wide. We are clearly in the heat of the moment. Decision time. I tell my husband to take Grace and carry her home while my son and I continue on to the school clean-up. Stating the obvious my son says, "Boy Mom. Dad sure was mad!"

Once I have a chance to breathe and arrive at school, I call my husband. As I effort to be calm, I tell him that I think Grace acted the way she did because she is scared of second grade and doesn't want anything to remind her that school is starting soon.

I learn later what happened between my husband and daughter. After the phone call, my husband gently approaches Grace about her possible fears. Although Grace is still very riled up, she is ready to answer my husband's questions, "Are you scared about second grade? Is that why you don't want to go to the school clean-up?" With a small glimmer of calm in her eye, she replies, "Yes, I am scared. I have a new teacher and there will be lots of kids in the class I don't know." As she calms down, my husband realizes that she is telling him that she is relieved to be understood. My husband helped create an emotionally safe space for Grace to share.

My husband's advice, which I love, to my daughter was this – "The best thing to do when you are scared is to have someone come and support you. Remember how this summer you were very nervous about riding two wheels? Well, mom supported you and now you love riding your bike. I will come with you to your classroom and hold your hand as you introduce yourself to your teacher and ask about her summer." Those words made Grace feel safe. She needed that to be able to move forward.

Her extreme act of defiance was a cry of desperation. When your child is disproportionately upset about a situation, the behavior is just a symptom. Most often their acting out is fear based. It is important to create an emotionally safe space for your child so they can share what is really going on. While this is not a new concept to me, or probably to you, reminders sure help and boy was this a powerful one.

By Stacey Holmes