

# IS THAT ME YELLING?

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A  
**Parent's Guide**  
*to Getting Your  
Kids to Cooperate  
Without Losing  
Your Cool*

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# Contents

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| <b>Foreword:</b> Why I Yell at My Kids               | VII |
| <b>Acknowledgments</b>                               | IX  |
| <b>Introduction:</b> You're Not Alone                | 1   |
| <b>PART 1 Understanding Yelling</b>                  |     |
| <b>1 “Is That Me Yelling?”</b>                       | 7   |
| Becoming Aware of Yourself                           |     |
| <b>2 “Why Am I Yelling?”</b>                         | 23  |
| Understanding Everyday Triggers                      |     |
| <b>3 “Why Am I <i>Really</i> Yelling?”</b>           | 47  |
| Digging Deeper                                       |     |
| <b>4 “What’s Temperament Got to Do with It?”</b>     | 67  |
| Adapting Your Parenting Style to Your Child’s        |     |
| Temperament  |     |
| <b>PART 2 Everyday Strategies for Yelling Less</b>   |     |
| <b>5 “Yelling Is So Easy ... Can I Really Stop?”</b> | 91  |
| Observing and Gathering Data for Success             |     |
| <b>6 “What Can I Do Instead of Yelling?”</b>         | 109 |
| Shifting Gears One Step at a Time                    |     |
| <b>7 “Help, Another Storm Is Coming!”</b>            | 137 |
| Stay Calm, Make Repairs, and Plan Your Course        |     |

## **PART 3 Special Circumstances**

|          |   |            |
|----------|---|------------|
| <b>8</b> | <b>“Help, I’m Not the Yeller”</b>                               | <b>163</b> |
|          | Dealing with the Yeller in Your Family                          |            |
| <b>9</b> | <b>“How Can I Stop Yelling When My Life Is So Challenging?”</b> | <b>183</b> |
|          | Dealing with Difficult Situations, Disorders, and Differences   |            |
|          | <b>Epilogue: World Peace Begins at Home</b>                     | <b>203</b> |
|          | <b>Appendix: Meditations</b>                                    | <b>205</b> |
|          | <b>Resources</b>  | <b>209</b> |
|          | <b>References</b>   | <b>213</b> |

# Chapter 1

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## “Is That Me Yelling?”

### Becoming Aware of Yourself

*“Without warning my son throws his toy car at his sister. She begins to cry, and he begins to laugh. The next thing I know, I’m yelling at the top of my lungs. I tell my son how sick and tired I am of his behavior and what a mean kid he’s become. Now both kids are crying and hiding under the table. I hate the out-of-control parent I’ve become.”*

—Jennifer, mother of a five-year-old son  
and a three-year-old daughter

Your wish to change is a gift to you and your family.

Many parents have told me that their desire to change came when they finally realized that they were not being patient or compassionate and that yelling was setting a bad example for their kids. They also saw that yelling wasn’t effective: it did not reduce their child’s misbehavior over time.

Realizing that you want to yell less and that you can do something about your automatic reactions is the first step on the path to change.

## How to Know When You're Yelling (and When You're Not)

When parents yell—regardless of their volume—they are usually angry or frustrated and have lost some degree of control. If you check-in with yourself, you can tell the difference pretty easily. For example, when I yelled at my kids, I always felt my intensity rising—my breathing was up, my heart rate was up, and I was literally feeling hot under the collar. I was no longer thinking clearly. My main goal was to express my frustration and let my kids know that they had better listen “or else.”

In contrast, the assertive communication you use thoughtfully as a part of the way you discipline is *not* the same as yelling. Being firm and calm is frequently a good way to get your child to listen to your requests. It is *not* yelling when you tell your child what you expect and what the consequences will be if he doesn’t do what you’ve asked.

### A Nonyelling Example

Here is a nonyelling example: Olivia is playing happily on the floor, and Nora squats down to her level. With a firm voice Nora says to her daughter, “It’s time to put your clothes on for school. I know you like playing, but the timer went off.” When Olivia continues to play and doesn’t respond, Nora continues in a firm tone, “If you are late for school today, there won’t be a playdate this afternoon. Will you get dressed yourself, or do you need some help?”

Nora’s tone of voice and attitude is key here. The same words could be said in a loud or harsh voice with a threatening tone, or they can be said with a firm and calm tone. If the goal is to criticize your child for not getting dressed and making you late, you might quickly transition into yelling. But if the goal is to help her learn about the morning routine, then staying calm is essential. If Nora started yelling as soon as she saw her daughter wasn’t dressed, chances are that Olivia would focus on feelings such as fear or anger instead of on getting her clothes on. Her feelings might trigger a stress response and cause her to cry, withdraw, or tune out. Getting dressed in the morning could become a battle that mother and daughter fight every day.

Yelling is usually a way to let children know that you're mad at them or at what they did. Yelling is usually not about teaching; it's about stopping behavior by intimidation or fear, and it's about expressing your negative feelings. How loud you yell will vary, but there is always an exaggerated intensity.

## Being Firm When Needed

I once took care of a friend's child who had trouble listening to the requests of adults. He was a sweet three-year-old boy who had a mind of his own. One day, we were walking on a busy street, and he ran ahead of me. I called for him to come back, but he kept going even though I knew he heard me. I caught up with him, got down to his level, looked him in the eyes, and said in a loud but controlled voice, "Don't ever run away from me again."

I was firm, but I was not out of control. I wanted him to feel the force of my statement so he would understand that what he did was not acceptable and not safe. For this child, who often tuned people out, it was an effective approach. When he started to cry, I made sure to give him a hug and tell him how much I cared about him and why it was important for him to stay with me. He was comforted, and we went on our way. I let his mom know what happened so she could follow up as needed.

The art of parenting is an improvisation that is fluid and always changing. If you put the physical and emotional needs of children at the center of your discipline and if you practice staying aware of your thoughts, your emotions, and your breathing, with a little luck, you will raise healthy and happy children. It's up to you to decide when yelling is appropriate and when to rethink your discipline approaches. Your relationship with your children is for a lifetime.

## Is Yelling Ever Appropriate?

Opinions vary about when it's appropriate to yell. You'll have to grapple with this question after observing the impact of your yelling. Most people I've talked to think it's appropriate to yell sometimes, especially

## IS THAT ME YELLING?

in dangerous situations when someone might get hurt—to stop a child who is reaching for the hot stove or about to dash into a busy street.

Here are some examples of when I think yelling is appropriate:

- If you see a car coming when your child is crossing the street and you don't think he's looking, a loud yell might be just what he needs to stop in time. (You *don't* go on and on yelling about what might have happened.)
- If your older child is about to feed the baby some peanuts and you're not close enough to stop her, a shout "No, don't do that!" might work well. This is especially effective if yelling is not your default method of communication.
- If your grandson spills water near your computer, you might yell loudly, "Oh no, get the towel!" In this case you're not yelling at the child, you are reacting to prevent a fried computer. (A note of caution: If you're in a bad mood, you might start to yell in a blaming way about the spilled water. Thoughts, such as *Why can't he be more careful?* might fuel your yelling. We'll talk about trigger thoughts in chapter 2.)

## EXERCISE: Why Parents Want to Yell Less

The parents who come to my workshops are probably a lot like you. They love their children, work hard at being good parents, and do their best at managing a home, a business, or both. Many of the parents I've talked with were raised by yellers. These parents are surprised to find themselves yelling because they made a promise to themselves not to imitate their parents and not to yell or express mean words to their kids. But somehow, it just comes out.

Some people have told me that they had unrealistic expectations about what it takes to raise a child. They had limited experience with kids before becoming a parent and didn't understand the time, money, and emotional commitment needed.

The following list of reasons parents want to stop yelling was gathered from the classes I've taught over the years. Review the list and check off the reasons you identify with. Add your reasons to the list.

## **"IS THAT ME YELLING?"**

- My dad yelled and was verbally abusive. I don't want to be like him.*
- My daughter doesn't listen when I yell; she tunes me out.*
- I want to model respectful behavior.*
- I want to be a better parent than I am right now.*
- I want to teach my kids to be good at resolving conflicts.*
- I've started to yell even when my son's friends are around.*
- I don't like how I feel when I yell.*
- I hated it when my parents yelled.*
- I feel guilty and ashamed when I yell and say angry things.*
- I want to break the cycle of yelling in my family.*
- I don't want to see the look of fear on my child's face.*
- I heard my son mumble, "Mama doesn't love me any more."*
- My daughter imitates me.*
- When I yell, it means I'm not good at my job.*
- Yelling drains my energy.*
- My kids yell at each other.*
- I'm afraid it will lead me to hitting my kids.*
- My neighbors give me dirty looks.*
- My kids run to my partner when I yell because they're afraid of me.*
- I feel like a mean dad.*
- I want to stop yelling because of the look on my child's face.*
- I don't want to damage my child.*
- Yelling makes me hate myself.*
- My wife told me I have to yell less.*

## IS THAT ME YELLING?

- I'm scared of my own yelling. It's as if I become another person.*
- My partner is afraid of me when I yell at the kids.*
- I don't want my kids to experience shame.*
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

Take some time to think about the role yelling has in your life. Use this list to help you reflect on your desire to yell less.

## How Yelling Affects Children

As you deepen your desire to yell less and as you prepare to make changes, an important piece of the puzzle is to consider the impact of yelling on children. In the list of reasons why you want to yell less, there are some examples of the consequences of yelling. Statements like “I don’t want to see the look of fear on my child’s face” and hearing your child say, “Mama doesn’t love me any more” are powerful incentives for change. We will come back to the specific consequences for *your* children, but first we’ll take a look at how yelling impacts the mental health of children in general.

Most professionals agree that yelling has an impact on a child’s feelings about themselves, their world, and the relationships they have with their parents and others. According to psychologist Myrna B. Shure (2005), when parents discipline by yelling and commanding, the children are more likely to show physical or verbal aggression. These children will have more difficulty with positive social behaviors such as taking turns and empathizing with another child.

## The Words You Say Matter

When considering the impact of yelling on children, consider the frequency, duration, and intensity of the yelling and the actual words you say to express your feelings. For example, yelling at a child from the

other room, "I said to stop jumping on the couch!" is different from yelling, "You're such a wild brat. I told you not to jump on the couch! Why can't you behave like your sister?" In this example, a child is being told that he is bad, and he's likely to interpret his father's words to mean that his sister is loved more.

## What Are Most Days Like?

Another factor to consider is what your family life is like most of the time. Do you usually enjoy open communication, fun together, and a sense that people love and trust each other? Or is there frequent tension, arguing, and a high stress level for all? If there is daily arguing and stress, then it's essential to put time and energy into slowly making shifts in family priorities. Your meaningful connections will help to balance out times of conflict as you are learning to yell less.

## Many Parents Are Yellers

Research shows that a high percentage of parents admit to yelling at their young children and to expressing psychological aggression toward them (Strauss and Field, 2003). So rest assured: you are not alone.

It's safe to assume that most of your friends and relatives also yell at their kids, but they may not want to talk about it due to feelings of embarrassment or incompetence. In some ways yelling has become the "new spanking." Because of the research on the negative consequences of spanking, many parents have made the decision not to physically hurt or hit their children but haven't learned what to do instead. Since there is a good chance you were raised by at least one parent who yelled, it's easy to resort to yelling as the go-to form of discipline.

Be forewarned: yelling at children on a regular basis will be setting them up for more challenges during the turbulent teenage years. Research presented in the book *When Anger Hurts Your Kids* shows that "the amount of anger expressed in the family will affect your child's performance in nearly every important area of his or her adolescent life. Anger casts a long shadow, blighting not just the moment, but the

## **IS THAT ME YELLING?**

emotional, academic, and social functioning of your child" (Tesser et al. 1989; McKay et al. 1996, 6).

If your child had a yelling match with you before leaving the house for school, his attention to detail on his early morning English test might be compromised by his physiological and emotional responses to the anger you both expressed. I know that when I've had an argument with my husband, my ability to think clearly and make work-related decisions are impaired until I can calm and soothe myself or apologize for my reactions. It takes insight and practice to understand and let go of hurt feelings.

*Anger is a normal emotion and is something everyone feels.* There is nothing wrong with feeling angry. In fact, your anger can help you understand what's working and not working in your life. It can also motivate you to take a stand at work, address a miscommunication, or clean out a messy garage. If you feel angry every time your teenager leaves her dishes on the table and walks away without saying thank you, your anger serves as a message that something needs to change. In that case, it might be time for a heart-to-heart talk with your teen about the value of developing an attitude of gratitude.

The practices you'll learn in this book will help you become aware of your negative feelings and manage the range of emotions that lead to yelling when your child misbehaves or just acts her age. The stakes are too high to continue to yell on a regular basis. You are missing too many good days filled with connection, respect, and love.

## **Assess the Effect of Yelling on Your Child**

Now that you've read about some of the negative consequences of yelling in general, it's time to see how yelling affects *your* child. All children are different, and one of the tasks of being a parent is to become an expert on your own child. If you are willing to observe yourself and your child, it can lead to living with more joy and pleasure, and you will have an easier time knowing what to do when your child misbehaves.

I admit that there were many times when I had blinders on, when I didn't want to see the consequences of my actions or inactions. It took me a long time (and I still work on this) to be courageous enough to see

things as they are and to be kind to myself at the same time. If you can quiet your overly critical thoughts, you will learn a tremendous amount. If your self-critic is fully employed, you will be less likely to want to notice the not-so-attractive side of yourself.

For an entire year I did an exercise where I kissed my hand and said, "I'm good" every time I made a mistake and when I heard myself say something negative about myself (internally or externally). I felt awkward and silly at first, but it was a concrete way for me to increase compassion toward myself. It takes practice to treat yourself with kindness. And the more you direct loving kindness toward yourself and others, the more relaxed and aware you will become. I mention this now because as you observe your child, feelings such as sadness, remorse, or guilt may arise. This step of observing the consequences of yelling at your child is vital to your goal of yelling less. You are making a commitment to learn the truth.

## **EXERCISE: Observe Your Child**

Your goal in this exercise is to learn about your child's response to your yelling. Don't change what you normally do, just observe the impact it has. If you have already started to yell less, think about the consequences you observed in the past.

How children react will depend on many factors including their temperament. For example, if your son is sensitive, your look of disappointment and your yelling tone might affect him for hours. You may find that he's quiet in the car and doesn't want to kiss you goodbye. When he should focus on his math, he can't because he is preoccupied with the fact that you yelled and called him selfish. A child who is sensitive is often highly perceptive and can easily internalize negative emotions. Another child, who is intense and high in energy, might yell back at you and then go off to school and have a decent day. She may even seem to enjoy a yelling match first thing in the morning, with you or with her little sister.

Temperament is a person's natural style of responding to people, places, and events. You move in the world based on many inborn traits. In chapter 4 you will learn about your child's temperament and your own. Understanding more about your style in relation to your child's temperament will help you reduce power struggles and yelling.

In this exercise you get to be the amateur sociologist as you learn about your child during the week. Write down what you notice about your child after you have yelled or spoken harshly. Use a journal or your computer to take notes. You will be able to go back to your notes when you need a reminder later on of why you are making the effort to change your yelling habit. Remember, the goal here is to observe your child during and after yelling. Don't focus your attention at this time on your actions, triggers, or feelings. That will come later.

Children respond to yelling in various ways. Below you will find typical responses. Check off the ones you identify with, and make notes of your observations.

*My child*

- tunes out my yelling;*
- looks frightened when I yell;*
- says something like, "You don't love me any more";*
- imitates me and starts to yell;*
- runs crying to mommy;*
- yells at friends and even the cat;*
- hides under the table and won't come out until I promise I'll stop;*
- has trouble separating from me after I've yelled;*
- comes home from school in a bad mood and goes right to his room;*
- tells me to use my inside voice;*
- laughs when I yell until I threaten to spank;*
- mopes around the house;*
- can't get to sleep after I've yelled;*
- plays hitting and punching games with her stuffed animals;*
- listens to me only when I yell;*
- doesn't seem bothered by my yelling;*
- doesn't bring his school friends over anymore;*

does what I've yelled at her to do;

\_\_\_\_\_

## Stick With It!

Making observations about the effect of yelling on your child is difficult, but stick with it: this practice will increase your feelings of empathy and guide you in your parenting practices. For example, if you see that your child has become immune to being yelled at, you will have more resolve to develop a new approach. If you see that your daughter has become a champion yeller, you will get the clear message that it's time to model a different kind of communication.

Be kind to yourself as you do this exercise. As you become familiar with yourself and develop more self-acceptance, your kindness toward your child will also grow.

Carla, a mother of twins, told me about an observation she made that confirmed her deep desire to stop yelling. "This morning Felicia said to her doll, 'I'm getting angry at you.' She hit the doll and shouted over and over, 'Go to sleep!'" Hearing this was painful for Carla but also vital to her efforts to change the nightly struggles at bedtime.

No parent wants to teach their child how to yell, except in dangerous situations. Since you are your child's first teacher, think about what kind of education you want to provide. Your frequent yelling can overshadow important life skills and lessons that you teach your child every day.

## What Would Your Child Tell You?

If your child could express how yelling affects her, what do you think she would say?

At a home visit I made in a professional capacity, I asked a seven-year-old boy, "If you had a magic wand and you could make a wish to change something about your father, what would it be?" He replied without hesitation, "I wish that he didn't yell anymore. At me or my mom." His father's stern face softened as he listened to his son and held

## **IS THAT ME YELLING?**

back his tears. He made a commitment then and there to do more about managing his anger and working on his marriage.

Being honest with yourself and observing what goes on in your family is a vital and difficult task. Recognizing mistakes and the consequences of your actions while being compassionate toward yourself is not something most people have been taught to do. Doing this work is like learning a new language or sport. You need tools, support from others, patience, a desire to reach your goals, and a willingness to make mistakes. As you read this book find a person you trust and can share some of your insights with.

## **Being a “Good Enough” Parent**

When I first began to notice how my yelling affected my kids, I felt lousy about the job I was doing as a mother. I thought it meant that I had failed and that I would never learn how to get good at the one job I wanted to master more than any other. Over the years I came to see that I would frequently feel insecure and frustrated and that new challenges were always just around the corner. With practice I learned how to reduce my yelling and name-calling and to recognize the good instincts I had as a mother. I observed the teachers in my children’s coop preschools and learned how the teachers got kids to cooperate without yelling. I read about child development to understand what was normal for different ages, and I talked to other parents to learn from them. I came to see I wasn’t the only one feeling confused. This book encapsulates what I learned. It will show you how you too can be a good enough parent, learn to tolerate the feelings of not knowing what to do, and respond rather than react to your child’s behavior. There is no such thing as perfection when it comes to parenting. So celebrate the good moments and learn from the hard ones. It’s never too late to make changes.

## **No Blaming, No Shaming**

Knowing why you want to yell less and understanding the consequences your yelling has on your children will motivate you to yell less.

So it's essential that you are honest with yourself, without shame or blame.

When you start to feel guilty or ashamed because you have yelled, think of something you can say to yourself to reframe your negative thoughts. Instead of thinking, *I've damaged my kids for life*, try replacing that thought with *I'm doing the best I can, and I'll keep learning more* or *It's never too late to change*. Take time to notice your feelings and thoughts and then find the words to substitute that are right for you. If you repeat negative thoughts about yourself, you are likely to feel bad and diminish your motivation to change. Your thoughts really do matter, and not being hard on yourself is an attitude worth developing.

When I had young children, I frequently criticized myself for not knowing what to do and at times thought I was a bad mother. When this happened I would in turn become more critical of the people around me, especially my children. Self-criticism and shame are not the same as taking your own measure, feeling regret, forgiving yourself, and coming to understand what you can do differently. Learn to be your own cheerleader, rooting for your success and being enthusiastic about your efforts.

## Using the Cognitive Behavioral Approach

In the example above I have asked you to change your thinking in order to change what you feel. I've come to value the cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) approach that many therapists use. I first learned about this approach from the book *When Anger Hurts Your Child* (McKay et al. 1996) when I was working on a 20/20 TV episode about parental anger with Matthew McKay. This type of treatment helps people understand more about the thoughts and feelings that influence their behaviors.

One of the reasons this approach is so powerful is that you have the capacity to notice and then change your thoughts in order to feel better and react differently to stressful situations. Asking parents to observe their thoughts, notice and identify emotions, and track their actions is a key component to yelling less. I have witnessed the benefit of this approach with many parents.

## IS THAT ME YELLING?

*Right now*, you can start to become aware of your negative thoughts and substitute something positive. I remember a time when I felt anxious on a turbulent airplane ride. I realized instead of saying to myself, *I'm going to die, and I will never see my kids again*, I could replace that repetitive thought with a simple, more positive (and more likely) statement: *This too shall pass. I'll be just fine*. Within no time, repeating these comforting words helped me feel less anxious. In the next chapter, you will learn how easy it is for your thoughts to trigger your emotions and set off your yelling.

## But I Want to Yell Less Now!

Change *can* happen quickly, but it is usually a slow and steady process.

Around thirty years ago I had a moment of clarity when I knew I should stop smoking for good. I had always stopped when I was pregnant and breastfeeding, but smoking helped me with focus and relaxation, so I would start again once my baby stopped nursing. With my third child, I had a craving to smoke before my son was ready to give up nursing. I took a puff of a cigarette from a friend, and instantly, I felt my heart skip a beat—not the good feeling of your heart skipping a beat when you fall in love, but the scary feeling of an irregular heartbeat. I immediately associated inhaling the smoke with damaging my heart and dying while my children were still young. That did it for me. I vowed to give up smoking, and I did.

Sometimes motivation, insight, and change can happen quickly, as it did for me at that moment. But it usually takes support, missteps, patience, practice, and persistence over time. Unlike smoking or not smoking, you can't always catch yourself when a request to put toys away starts to morph into a yelling match. Giving up cigarettes was easier for me than learning to manage my anger and frustration when I was faced with misbehaving kids who triggered me to act in ways I didn't want to.

It's important to remember that your yelling is just *one* part of how you are as a parent. You are not yelling at your child twenty-four hours a day. Take a moment to bring to mind a recent time when you were compassionate, loving, and responsive to your child. What did you do instead of yelling that had a good outcome? How did you feel? Take a

minute to picture the situation and the positive consequences for your child and for yourself. This experience can be a blueprint for a future of increased harmony at home.

I remember a day when my son started to pick on his sister (which he often did). Instead of yelling (which I often did then), I said something like, "Matt, did someone pick on you today?" He stopped and looked sad, and I knew he needed a hug and time to talk about what he dealt with at school. His behavior had meaning, and I was calm enough to see that. He also needed to understand that picking on his sister wouldn't solve his difficulties.

Your desire to yell less will be informed by the observed and imagined consequences for you and your children. My desire to stop smoking came when I realized that my health was at risk; my wish to not yell at my kids came when I saw I was modeling responses that I disapproved of and did not want to perpetuate. An honest assessment frees you to move forward.

In the next chapter, you will learn about *self-observation*. This art of paying attention to yourself will help you observe the way you move, react, breathe, speak, and feel. It's done with compassion and a desire to see things as they are without judgment. It's so much easier to be calm and less reactive to your kids once you've taken stock of the kinds of behaviors and situations that set you on the warpath of yelling.

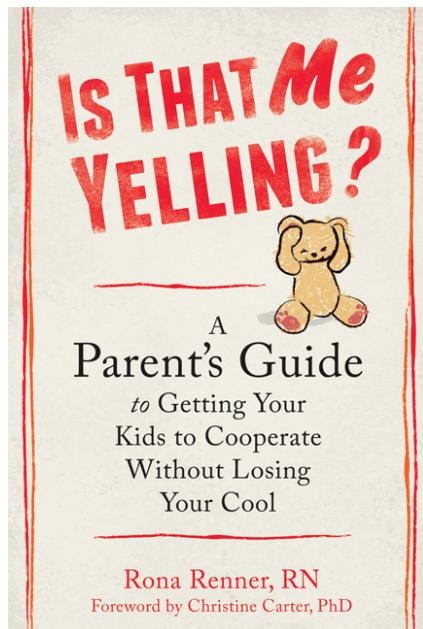
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## A Thought to Consider: *Yelling comes easily to me.*

Even though you know that yelling isn't the best way to discipline your child, notice how often you resort to it. Yelling happens so fast without much effort or planning. Keep paying attention to the impact it has on your child and on you. Is it working to accomplish what you want?

Yelling may come easily, but so do the deep concern and love you have for your child. Picture how you will feel when yelling doesn't come easily anymore.

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When children refuse to do even little things—like picking up their toys or getting in the car to go to school—it's easy for parents to become frustrated. Using mindfulness techniques based in cognitive behavioral theory (CBT) and temperament theory, learn how to effectively communicate with your kids, reduce conflict, and foster cooperation, respect, and understanding in your family.

## ***Is That Me Yelling?***

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