

Protection Three: Fight, Flight or Freeze

We touched briefly on the fight or flight response in the context of helping your child begin to understand and talk about their emotions. This lesson explores the fight or flight response further, adding the element of “freeze”.

The symptoms of a fight or flight response are as follows:

- increased heart rate
- upset or butterfly stomach
- tense muscles
- fast, sometimes regrettable verbal or physical reactions
- quick thoughts/seeing red

For some people, the response includes freezing of thought and/or physical abilities.

Think about times when you have experienced a fight or flight reaction. What are the things that set you into a fight or flight reaction? What are the situations or phrases that you find threatening? Often, especially with regard to parenting, a threat to parental authority (a child talking back) will cause a fight or flight reaction.

Again, in combination with the fight or flight reaction, remember that anger has an underlying emotion. To dissolve a reaction, the underlying emotion and threat must be recognized. Once it is, it can be addressed and removed. Remaining adrenaline can be removed through physical activity and relaxation practice.

Dissolving this reaction is essential to becoming more assertive. Becoming more assertive helps you, and your child manage others' bad behavior in a calm and capable way.

Activities:

Explain the fight or flight response, and adrenaline to your child.

Brainstorm how you and your child are affected by fight or flight reactions. Discuss what kinds of things bring on fight or flight reactions for each of you (keeping it child appropriate - do not discuss work conflict or conflict with your spouse), and how that reaction feels.

Take your pulse, teaching your child how to do the same and helping them. Run in place for a minute. Take your pulse/child's pulse again. Talk about how an elevated heart rate feels. Talk about the difference between elevating your heart through exercise versus the fight or flight reaction. What are the differences in how your body feels?

Brainstorm and practice activities your child likes that use up extra adrenaline.

Lie down and practice breathing deeply together. Try to time your breathing to your child's breathing to make it comfortable for your child. Put your hand on your stomach, and on your child's stomach to show how, when you breathe in, your stomach expands. Depending on the age of your child and the relationship you have with them, you may wish to have them lay their head on your stomach and feel the motion that happens when you breathe deeply.

Explore age appropriate meditation tapes with your child. Examples are found on the ***No Such Thing as a Bully***® website.

There is a two minute relaxation exercise on the ***No Such Thing as a Bully***® website. Follow the instructions and practice the exercise together.

Role-play threatening situations. These may be bullying situations, or dinosaur attacks or any other situation that your child is interested in. Mirror some of the stories discussed in previous lessons, particularly for older children. After the role-play, ask them to describe how they feel. Is their heart going faster? Are they sweating?

Notice your own fight flight and freeze reactions and those of your child in the weeks and months to come.