



Building parent-school partnerships

WORDS Michael Grose

The trick to being at your parenting best

Parenting is place of great joy, but it's also a place of great struggle.

We struggle with our role as it's constantly evolving and changing.

We struggle with external factors such as the changing face of technology and its impact on kids' daily lives.

We struggle with factors we can't control such as the messages kids get from the media and their peers that we rather they didn't receive.

But the biggest struggle for most of us happens within the grey matter between our ears. It's the battle that goes on between our lizard brain (*where the fight or flight response occurs*) and our pre-frontal cortex (*where reasoning and calculation*) occurs.

The pre-frontal cortex (*put your hand on your forehead and you're there*) is a cool, calm and rational place. This article is being written from that space. The lizard brain sits way back in the middle of our brain and is programmed to take over from our pre-frontal cortex when we're under threat or stress. If I took a phone call about an imminent bomb threat while writing this article my lizard brain would take over and I'd be out of my office in a heartbeat. Writing would become impossible, not to

say stupid! Thank goodness for our lizard brain. When I'm safe and feeling calm my pre-frontal cortex can do its rational thing once more. This system has served us well, keeping us safe for an eternity.

Unfortunately our lizard brain, the simple creature that it is, can't differentiate between a significantly stressful situation such as a bomb threat and an everyday stressor such as a noisy sibling fight that occurs right under our nose. Our limbic system responds in exactly the same way – the lizard brain takes over from our pre-frontal cortex so you'll either fight (argue, yell, lash out) or flee (get away fast) regardless of the stress. Both situations would elicit the same type of physical response such as an increase in heartbeat, sweaty palms and shortness of breath. Only the severity and intensity of the response is different.

Just when we need to be at our parenting best

So the great struggle for many parents, and also the great irony, is that when we need to be at our parenting best (when we're responding to poor behaviour or a child's genuine cries for help) our lizard brain often takes over and we're at our parenting worst.

That's why most of us know how we want to respond and communicate with our kids when we're calm but when we are under intense pressure not only can't we find the words we need but we lose our cool as well!

The good news is your lizard brain can be tricked into working for you, not against you. It takes patience and practice. Here's how:

1 Recognise the situations and the symptoms

Self-knowledge is the best knowledge you can have. When you understand the situations that cause you stress and bring you quickly to high emotion then you can prepare yourself in advance for such situations. Also when you understand your typical physiological responses you are well positioned to control your responses. Our physical responses vary: I generally feel nauseous; become physically agitated and my breath gets very high in my chest when I'm under intense stress. Knowing this has been a huge help to me staying calm in situations where I used to over-react.

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2 Train yourself to STOP!

The lizard brain wants you to act fast – **to get away, to lash out, to defend yourself** – when you’re under threat or stress. So going against this natural urge is a challenge but it can be done. Develop the habit of doing nothing when you find yourself under parenting stress. STOP rather than act impulsively. Don’t let the lizard-brain win!

3 Step away and breathe

Deep nasal breathing is the quickest way to bring down your physical symptoms and rein in negative thoughts (“*I’m going to &&** him!*”) that feed your lizard brain. Step away or turn slightly away from the stressful situation to help you breath slowly and deeply.

4 Think of your Best parenting self

Inspire your pre-frontal cortex to trump your lizard brain by activating an image of your ‘best’ or ‘ideal’ self as a parent. First you need to work out when you’re at your parenting best – it maybe when you’re patient, caring, loving, calm... (*You can learn this powerful process in my Parenting with the Meta-Moment course available in Parentingideas Club*) Your “Best Parenting Self” is the motivator to help you refrain from making emotional responses that you’ll regret later.

5 Now act!

Now that your pre-frontal cortex is winning again it’s time to think of the best possible response to a tricky parenting situation: which may be to ignore behaviour; use appropriate language or just listen calmly when your child is in distress.

So how often does your lizard brain win when you experience parenting stress? If it always comes out on top then you’ll find it hard to parent as you’d like. You’ll be fighting your limbic system as well as your kids. Get it under control and you’ll be better placed to respond to your kids as you’d like to in the cool, calm light of day.



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