

Your kid is having a meltdown in the supermarket: What to do in tough parenting moments

December 16 2021, by Julia Caldwell, Koa Whittingham, Pamela Meredith



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You walk into a room. You are going to play a game. Your competitors?
Other parents.

There will only be one winner.

Your aim is to survive.

No, we're not talking about Squid Game but Channel 9's show [Parental Guidance](#), which aired season one's final episode last month.

Parents competed against one another to find the "best" parenting style. Is it the protective helicopter, the ambitious tiger, or the relaxed free-range? ([Spoiler](#): the free-range [parents](#) won.)

But parents on the show faced internal competition too, just as every parent does, every moment of every day. It is a competition between three systems that have evolved to help us survive: the threat system, the drive system and the soothing system.

And just as with Parental Guidance, one system is the ultimate "winner" for parenting. Let us explain.

What are the three systems?

British clinical psychologist Paul Gilbert's [theory of evolution](#) helps us understand these three functional emotional systems. You can think of each one as a brain state with specific brain regions and chemistry. Once you are in a particular state, it will color your world—what you see and how you act.

We switch between these systems, or states, depending on what is going on around, or inside, us. Each system evolved for a reason and each has its purpose and place.

The threat system motivates us to survive under conditions of threat. Think about stumbling across a lion after getting your morning coffee. Your threat system would automatically kick in. You'd feel more alert as your body would be flooded with fear. You'd have a surge of adrenaline and cortisol, feel anxiety, anger or disgust. You may fight the lion (if the odds are good), or flee in fear.

Your threat system also helps you protect your child. It gives you the burst of alertness and energy to chase after a wandering toddler or stick up for your child at school or in the family.

The drive system is about seeking out good things—from food to falling in love. This system activates [positive emotions](#) such as excitement, pleasure or desire. It helps ensure parents have food on table and a roof over their family's head, and prompts them to seek out fun family activities like a trip to the zoo.

And then there's the soothing system. This one's about feeling calm and grounded and is vital to maintaining equilibrium. Guess what gets it going? Other people being kind and compassionate. It's that warm, fuzzy, heart-warming feeling you get when you feel loved and give love to others.

The soothing system is activated by moments like lazy cuddles with your child in bed or snuggling up together to watch a favorite movie. In these moments, you feel a rush of feel-good chemicals: opiates and oxytocin (the chemical released after baby has been born). This makes it feel good being close to, and getting along with, others.

So, why does all this matter? Because parenting often feels like a [pressure cooker](#), and that leads to over-activation of the threat system.

No one should be blamed for this—after all, it's evolution. The problem

is, when your threat system is on, you probably feel anxious, down and like you are not good enough as a parent. You probably feel shame.

Research shows when parents feel shame they are more likely to resort to [controlling types of parenting](#) and the use of [punishment](#). Research also shows children of [parents with anxiety disorders](#) are more likely to suffer anxiety themselves.

So, what do you do?

The best way to dampen down the threat system is to activate the soothing system. And remember what does that—other people. We can deliberately practice love and compassion for ourselves, and others, to train our soothing system to respond more often.

Self-compassion is being aware of what sets off our pressure cooker and doing things to reduce the pressure. It's also about treating ourselves the way we'd treat our closest friends.

Self-compassion might mean planning an easy dinner on a busy day, taking 20 minutes to relax with a good book, or simply giving yourself permission to make mistakes.

And we can give that compassion to our children, too. Science shows greater compassion in parenting is [associated with better relationships](#), connection and resilience in children.

The situations that activate your parenting threat system are countless: your child screaming in a store or running around in a restaurant and refusing to calm down.

Your immediate reaction is most likely a threat response. You may feel angry at your child's behavior, or with yourself. While in truly

threatening life-or-death situations such emotions help us take action, a threat response in a less dire situation might prime you to fight.

The first thing to do when you feel this anxiety is breathe. Slowly and deeply. And to become aware that your threat system is well and truly active.

The second thing is to remember children have the same [threat](#) system too. Part of our job is to lay down the soothing system for our children, until they can do it for themselves. So, tell your child you understand their pain. As Dr. Justin Coulson, expert on Parental Guidance, says: "When someone is having a difficult time, behaving in a challenging way, they don't need us to tell them that they are being silly, to calm down, to be quiet, to grow up. What they actually need is to have compassion [...] to join them in their suffering [...] to say, "It's tough, isn't it? How can I help?"

All parents have been down this path, and this is really hard. Ultimately, you will be okay.

None of us can be perfectly compassionate at every moment. And when we fail at being this, what should we do? Be compassionate, of course. Give yourself permission to be human and make mistakes, just as you do with your children.

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Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Your kid is having a meltdown in the supermarket: What to do in tough parenting moments (2021, December 16) retrieved 5 May 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2021-12-kid-meltdown-supermarket-tough-parenting.html>

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