



Handout 18

How buttons get pressed

Looking after children can be a hard and relentless job. Sometimes the job seems more difficult because it is almost as if, as parents, we have to deal with two children: the actual child that is in front of us but also the child and the childhood within us that somehow pops up (even without realising) during the stressful years of parenting. There is no time like bringing up children when, uncannily, nerves or buttons from our own childhood get pressed.

At times like this, as parents, we may find ourselves overreacting or behaving in a way that makes us question 'Where is this strength of feeling coming from?' and 'Is this really about the child in front of me or the child within me?'.

We all carry both difficult and happy experiences from our childhoods, even when we cannot remember them very well. Usually if our childhood stages have gone fairly smoothly we can help our children get through similar phases in a fairly easy and smooth way.

However, if some phases in our childhoods have been difficult for us, then those conflicts pop up again to niggle us; it can make those phases our children go through more difficult to manage emotionally and practically. Examples of difficulties can be: if we found weaning difficult we may revisit that time (even without realising it) when we wean our own child; or when children have tantrums that trigger memories of our tantrums at that age. Other examples can be when children:

- start growing away from us to become more independent
- refuse our help or comfort
- cry for what seems like forever.

During these particular situations, feelings arise in us such as irritation and anger than can lead to us overreacting.

Being aware of these difficulties is not a sign of weakness, nor does it mean that you are being a bad parent. It happens to every parent to some degree. In fact, if parents can get in touch with these difficult and uncomfortable feelings and try to own them, it might save the child from being burdened with more than his or her fair share of negative feelings.

It is natural for parents to feel, for example, that a child is 'ungrateful', 'winding me up', 'just like his father', or 'crying on purpose'. But thinking about what thoughts come to mind for parents can help us to better manage those feelings and to avoid false beliefs being conveyed to a small child. For example, an aggressive and spiteful toddler might remind you of someone you do not like but actually the toddler is just being a toddler going through a phase of expressing aggression; a child who pushes you away and wants to be independent is not really rejecting you or making you feel useless, he is just getting on with the task of growing forward into another phase.

Being aware of what buttons may get pressed and knowing why certain situations upset us can help us to manage our strong feelings in a balanced way and help our children to manage theirs.