

# You've Just Learned About An Affair

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## WHEN YELLING IS A PATTERN

### YELLING AT CHILDREN

This is a topic that has meaning for everyone. All of us have raised our voices, probably more than once. No, I did not come from a home of screaming parents or siblings. However, I do see many families and couples who yell a lot at each other, and the short and long-term consequences of regular yelling/screaming are not pretty. Those of you who experience yelling know what I'm talking about.

Let's start with the impact of yelling at children:



First, it teaches them how to yell, when to yell, and that yelling is an effective response to emotionally charged situations. By extension, it teaches them an ineffective way to process anger, as anger is usually associated with yelling.

Second, yelling scares most children—the younger the child, often the more fear they feel. In a state of fear it is next to impossible for a child to think about their mistake or misbehavior. If a child cannot think about their mistake, a child cannot learn from their mistake.

Third, regularly yelling at a child before the age of 3 or 4, or before they have an expansive developmental use of language, teaches them to replace useful language with yelling. In other words, a child will not learn useful, effective expression when yelling is their model. The short version is, 'if mom and/or dad yell, then so can I.' They are too young to know better.

Back to the fear induced by a yelling parent. Children are far less likely to learn the lesson you want them to learn when they are afraid. Instead of the lesson they might otherwise learn from natural, appropriate consequences associated with their mistake, they learn to be afraid. Fearful children often grow up to be fearful adults and parents. Sometimes they grow up to be yellers. No surprise.

### HELPLESSNESS

Not only is yelling learned from our own parents in some cases, it also means a parent probably feels helpless. It is a sign that a parent does not know a more effective alternative at that moment. Helplessness is a very powerful feeling, and when the brain reads the 'helpless signal,' so to speak, it will do almost anything to reduce it. The antidote to helplessness begins with a four step process, which will aide in reducing/stopping yelling at the kids:

First, make a conscious, verbal decision to stop.

Second, make the commitment to learn the skills necessary for replacing yelling with effective responses. Go to [The Love and Logic Institute](#), and invest in their parenting CD's, books & DVD's. From that material you can learn those skills (*no, I do not get residuals for recommending their remarkable material, but I'd appreciate it if you would tell them I sent you!*). All you need to know about replacing yelling, and learning how to really enjoy parenting is there. OK, now that's your skills toolbox. But, now you have to reduce the reactivity that precedes your yelling—that's the hard part. Parents who effectively manage their emotional reactivity do not tend to yell.

Third, if reactivity (which I will say more about below) and anger are problems for you, which frequently is the case with chronic yellers, professional counseling may be your best investment.

Fourth, try this new thought as a guide to changing your thinking about yelling as you consider making your decision to stop: *There is nothing a child can do that calls for yelling at them—unless it will literally save their life.*

By the way, in 29 years of practice, I've never met a parent who remarked: "Boy, do I regret not yelling at my kid, what a mistake that was."

### YELLING AT YOUR SPOUSE/PARTNER

Yelling at your spouse/partner induces fear, just as it does in a child. Brain research has shown that it is very difficult to think while in a state of fear. If you want your partner to think about what you say, the odds for that increase when you speak in a way that does not produce fear. When your partner hears yelling, the brain reads it as DANGER, and your partner experiences fear. It (the brain) immediately goes in to some degree of fight or flight mode—how much depends on the amount of perceived threat. The behavior from your partner at that point will probably range from yelling back/defensiveness (fight mode) to silence/withdrawal (flight mode). Neither will produce a satisfactory outcome.

Fight mode is sometimes referred to as "reactive." In fight or reactive mode we tend to say things we regret or

wish we could take back, which, of course calls for **repair**. Part of this pattern often includes your partner reacting defensively and/or critically when yelled at. That defensiveness triggers more frustration, anger and lashing out. Without knowing what to do, or how to respond differently, the cycle is repeated, and both partners suffer and struggle with a broken or unsatisfactory conflict management process. The next time an issue surfaces it will be anticipated with dread.

Flight mode is also referred to as silence/withdrawal. In flight mode, two common options arise: One, you either do not know what to say due shutting down with fear; or, two, you may know exactly what you want to say, but, you say nothing because a part of you believes that what you think and/feel is unimportant, so why bother. Either way you have no voice. In the end, both you and your partner are probably angry, hurt, disappointed and frustrated, and blaming the other for the “breakdown in communication.”

More accurately, there was no “breakdown in communication,” per se. In fact, there was plenty of communication, too much of it ineffective. More significant was the breakdown in reactivity management. All the good communication skills in the tool bag will be of little use in the face of unchecked or poorly managed reactivity. Why might professional counseling helpful at this point? Because chronic ineffectively managed reactivity almost always has *some* roots in our early history. A competent marital therapist can help connect early roots to current events, finish some old business, and help you develop reactivity management alternatives.

## AN ALTERNATIVE TO YELLING

I am aware that many of you prefer counseling as a last resort. If that’s the case, on your own, try the following:

1. Before you begin your discussion, each of you verbally acknowledge your willingness to break the pattern that is not working. It might sound like this: “The last time we discussed this, I did not react effectively. I am going to try some new behaviors.”
2. Next, each of you openly acknowledge to your partner how you aspire to be during the discussion. If you tend to be the yeller, acknowledge that you aspire to be calm, and what new behavior you plan to employ if you begin to feel activated. You might say, for example, “I’m starting to feel like I want to yell, my frustration is building, I would like to stop for a few minutes so that I can get calm again.” **THAT WOULD BE NEW BEHAVIOR**. If you begin to feel activated, take responsibility for it—do not **blame** your partner. What ever new behavior you decide to try, let it be known in advance of the discussion. No surprises, unless they’re pleasant ones.
3. Hold yourself to the healthy code of conduct to which you aspire; let your partner do the same for him/herself. How you aspire to be is all you have control over.
4. In advance, put a time limit on the length of the discussion. If you each feel comfortable continuing on, agree to another time limit. Repeat as necessary.
5. When either of you call for a time out, especially to lower your reactivity, decide on a time to resume. This reduces the chances of avoiding your way out of the discussion entirely.
6. After the discussion, *and only if you both agree to*, analyze YOUR own respective roles in how the discussion went. Talk about yourself, unless complimenting your partner. Determine where you might become more effective, and tell your partner. Focus on your behavior, not your partner’s.

Good luck in your attempts to break this difficult pattern. It’s not easy. The fact that you made an attempt builds trust and self confidence.

Wishing you a satisfying relationship,

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