children and grownups are different:

A Book for Grownups Who May Have Forgotten About Being a Kid

by Sandra L. Bloom, M.D.

www.sanctuaryweb.com
It is VERY important that parents learn about how very different grownups and children actually are from each other. Everyone knows that adults and children don’t LOOK the same.
But not everyone realizes that children THINK differently than adults,

“WHAT was he thinking ????

children FEEL differently than adults, and

“If only he wasn’t so emotional!”
children BEHAVE differently than adults

- and that all of this is NORMAL.
Children are very different from adults for one main reason: for a long time after they are born, their brains are still developing.

In fact, the human brain doesn’t really reach its adult form until we are about 21! So even teenagers don’t yet have brains that are fully developed adult brains.
This is the reason why children need to be protected from too many stressful things - DEVELOPING BRAINS CAN BE HURT BY STRESS EVEN MORE THAN ALREADY DEVELOPED BRAINS - although stress can hurt us regardless of how old we are.

**TOO MUCH STRESS IS CALLED:**

**TOXIC STRESS**

And toxic stress is especially bad for children
In fact, too much stress early in a child’s life can make it difficult for a child to learn new things, difficult for them to remember important things, and difficult for them to put ideas together in their heads.

As a result, many very smart children end up doing badly at school because they have not had enough protection to give their young and vulnerable brains a chance to develop properly.
Stress can come from outside - like when grownups fight with each other or get very mad at their children.

Or stress can come from inside - from having too many overwhelming and bad feelings.
But whatever the source of the stress, after providing children with food and shelter, the most important job of parenting is to protect children and their brains from TOO MUCH STRESS.

But what is the best way for parents to do that? Figuring that out is the hard part. Some parents believe that punishing their kids for doing scary or bad things is the best way they have of protecting their children. Other parents think that the best way to protect them is to prevent them from going out of the house. Other parents believe that children have to learn for themselves “the hard way”.

Every child is different
Every parent is different
Every situation is different.
However, we have learned some things about what frightens children and how bad fear can be for their bodies, minds, and souls.
Children learn through two main emotions:

**LOVE**

*and FEAR.*
By frightening children, grown-ups can alter children’s behavior powerfully in the short-run, but over the long-term, FEAR MAKES PEOPLE SICK IN MIND, BODY AND SPIRIT.
On the other hand, the EFFECTS OF LOVE can take longer to see but produce a healthier and safer child, able to balance thoughts and emotions and make good decisions.

For children, an important part of loving them is protecting them from situations they are not ready to handle well while teaching them how to handle more and more difficult situations.
Children are more easily frightened than most adults. Compared to adults, children are helpless in the world.
Whether you are an adult or a child, FEELING HELPLESS IS A VERY BAD FEELING. Adults need to remember that children feel relatively helpless all the time and as a result, they depend on adults to feel safe.
It’s very important for grownups to understand the differences between the way a grownup thinks and the way a child thinks.

Because the brains of children are still developing, it takes a long time for children to learn how to match up words to the way they feel. As a result, children SHOW what they FEEL long before they can TALK about what they feel.
When kids - or grownups - are afraid there are only three basic things they can do:

**They can run away from whoever is making them afraid**

**They can fight whoever is making them afraid**
Or they can freeze and hope that whoever is making them afraid won't see them and will go away
Sometimes kids run away and hide inside themselves.

I DON'T KNOW
I AM IN A DAZE

They may live in a fog as a way of not remembering or thinking about bad things that have happened to them or scary things they have heard or seen.

The official word for that is DISSOCIATION.
When frightening things happen, children get scared first and then later, when things are calmer, they may feel sad or angry - or sad AND angry.
When children feel sad or angry they may cry,

or lose interest in the things they do that make them feel good

or they may withdraw from other people and just want to be alone
and sometimes bad sadness or anger looks just like being sick

Some kids try to comfort themselves with food and end up eating too much, using food as a way of helping themselves feel better.
Some kids who are sad or angry, hurt themselves by doing drugs, or drinking, or doing very risky things.

And sometimes kids who are really sad pick fights with other people or get into a lot of trouble because the trouble they cause takes their mind off of how bad they feel.
Because they do not have much experience with the world yet, and have vivid imaginations, children cannot always tell the difference between what is real and what is imaginary.

Sometimes things that are very real threats - like guns - are perceived by a child as toys.

While sometimes imaginary threats - like an angry parent saying “I could just kill you” - are taken as absolutely true.

If you speak to me like that again I will knock your head off!
At other times, children overestimate their ability to handle things they really can’t handle.

Sometimes they will do risky things because they do not have enough experience to know what is dangerous.

At other times they may know what is dangerous but are influenced by their friends to take risks anyhow.
If the adults around them are scared, or if the adults around them are scary, it is impossible for a child to feel safe.

When children don’t feel safe, or don’t feel they can depend on the adults around them, they are likely to show their distress through PROBLEM BEHAVIOR rather than through words.
When children behave in ways that cause problems, the adults around them tend to get very ANGRY with them. Grownup anger scares children.
But because they are still children, they lack the skills to figure out how to solve this problem. Instead they just get more scared, feel more unsafe, and then show their distress through MORE PROBLEM BEHAVIOR.
Sometimes the problem behavior causes problems for other people. But sometimes the problem behavior just causes problems for the children, like when they withdraw from other people, become depressed, or go inside themselves for comfort.
It’s very easy for grownups and children to get caught in VICIOUS CYCLES as a result:
the child feels unsafe, he/she “acts up”,
the grownup punishes him/her for “acting up”,
the child feels frightened and more unsafe,
he/she “acts up” some more - and so on.

In the end, the child doesn’t learn very much except how to avoid the grownup and the grownup feels frustrated and helpless to “control” the child. Everyone feels bad.

That’s why it is a VICIOUS cycle.
If this VICIOUS cycle has already started with your children, remember that it is a pattern, a habit, and that habits can change.

But because you are the grownup, you will have to change the pattern first.

Think about what the pattern is - write it down - draw it. And then, think of something different and unexpected to do.
Whenever we are in a pattern with another person, it’s hard for us to think our way out of it sometimes, so ask somebody else for suggestions.

Try and do something different that is also pleasurable for you and makes you feel better instead of worse - it probably will feel better for your children as well!
You have probably heard the expression “little pitchers have big ears” - I don’t know about pitchers, but children often hear things that grownups think they are keeping secret. You can probably think of some things you heard as a child that the grownups in your life didn’t know you had heard.

Because children feel completely dependent on their parents or relatives they can be just as frightened by a threat to a person they love as they are by a threat on their own lives.
For children, watching someone else be hurt and being unable to help the hurt person, can be as frightening as being hurt themselves.

If there are fights going on in your house, your children know it - even if don’t think they do - and it scares them. They may pretend they didn’t see anything, hear anything, or know anything but they do.

Children want to feel safe and secure and when grownups fights it makes children feel like something really bad is going to happen.... And sometimes it does.
All kinds of bad things can happen to children, even when their parents love them a lot, even when their parents try to protect them from harm.

Bullies can show up just about anywhere - at school, at the playground, at church - and even at home.
Many children live in neighborhoods where bullies seem to be everywhere and some of them carry guns or knives.

And sometimes when bullies fight other bullies, children get caught in the crossfire and get hurt themselves or see other people hurt.
Children also get scared when someone tries to do something to their body that doesn’t feel right - sexually or physically. When children’s bodies are hurt, they feel pain and the situation causes a great deal of STRESS.

Many parents believe that hitting their children is an important part of teaching them the difference between right and wrong.

Children do need to know what is right and what is wrong but they learn those rules best when they are taught what is right because they are treated with love, kindness, respect and how to discipline themselves.
The problem with hitting children is that they may learn all kinds of things that parents didn't intend. They may learn to be so frightened of their parents that they stop confiding in them.

They may learn that hitting people is an OK thing to do to solve a problem or to teach a lesson.
They may learn that bullying other people feels better than being bullied yourself, or they may learn to disconnect from their body so that they don’t feel things the same way for the rest of their lives.
Being a parent is just about the hardest job in the world.

So here are some tips:

1. Remember what it felt like to be a child yourself - helpless, eager for love, dependent, and vulnerable - and remember the way you wanted the grownups in your life to treat you.
2. Remember that as a parent, you are teaching your children ideas, behaviors, skills, and beliefs about the way relationships work that will influence them for their entire lives.
3. Remember how powerful you are in relation to your children. Everything you say and do becomes a model for them of the way people should behave and the way people should treat each other.
4. Try not to frighten your children and if they do get scared, comfort them, hold them, and let them know you are there to protect them from harm as best you can.
5. Apologize to your children if you do something wrong or something you are ashamed of - it sets a good example and gives them an experience of fairness and honesty in a relationship.
6. Teach them how to avoid dangerous people and dangerous situations so they can protect themselves when you are not there.
7. If your children experience a really bad thing, let them know that you are willing to talk about it whenever they are ready to talk about it.
8. Be curious about your children’s behavior - even their bad behavior. Ask yourself what it could possible mean - what they are trying to tell you with the way they are acting. Talk to them about it - use it as an opportunity to teach them things they need to know about the world.
9. When your children do something wrong, arrange for them to have consequences that result in them learning something you WANT them to learn and not something you DON’T want them to learn. Punishment has no point at all if it only teaches your children to fear YOU!
10. If you and your children have fallen into some negative pattern and they keep doing the same bad things and you keep responding in the same way - then change the pattern, be less predictable, do something entirely different than what you have done before. And if you can’t think of anything to do differently, ask a friend, someone with another point of view. You will be surprised at the things you can’t see until someone else points it out to you.
11. View every moment you have with your children - the good ones and the ones that try your patience - as opportunities for you all to learn something important about each other.
12. Remember that we are all here to learn from each other and to teach each other. Be as open to learning from your children as they are open to learning new things from you. If your children begin closing down on you and refusing to learn from you then you need to change your teaching methods, not keep doing the same thing over and over that doesn't work. In the process of changing for them, you will learn a lot as well. And learning can be a great deal of fun.