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Is It the Fish or the Water? How to Know If Your Child Needs Help—Or If It's You

I teach this to educators and child service providers all the time: if you want to support a child, you have to look at two things—the fish *and* the water.

In other words, we can't fully understand a child's behavior without considering the fish *and* the water. The child is the fish. *We*—the adults—are the water. That means our moods, our stress levels, our tone, and our expectations all shape the environment the child is swimming in. If the water's off, the fish will show signs of stress.

So here's the big question: how do we know when it's *them*... and how do we know when it's *us*?

Let's go with the saltwater tank metaphor. What's the temperature of your tank? Are you running too hot or too cold? What's the salinity? Too salty? Too sweet? Kids need a balanced, stable environment—and that starts with *us*.

Mindful-ish® parenting is rooted in the principles of an authoritative style—one that blends warmth with structure, nurturance with limits. But achieving that balance isn't easy, especially with the stress of work, relationships, health, and, well... parenting itself.

So how do you stabilize the water in your tank?

Here are three ideas (not tricks or hacks—this is real life) to help you regulate yourself. After all, your ability to stay regulated is what makes co-regulation with the little guppies in your care possible.

1. QTIP: Quit Taking It Personally

This acronym comes from Dr. Becky Bailey of *Conscious Discipline*, and it's saved me more times than I can count. Kids are supposed to test boundaries. They want what they want, when they want it—and none of it is personal. It's developmental.

Still, it *feels* personal when your toddler refuses to put on pants or your preschooler screams that you're the “worst mommy ever.” That's when I QTIP.

Sometimes I literally carry one around in my pocket or attach it to my bra strap. It's a reminder: *This isn't about me. This is a child doing what children do.*

And let's be honest—QTIP works for grown-up relationships, too.

2. You Can Explode, Implode... or Breathe

Stress doesn't just vanish. If you don't release it, it gets expressed one way or another—through yelling (exploding), through illness or physical pain (imploding), or through intentional breathwork.

But here's the thing: trying to "take a deep breath" in the heat of the moment *won't help* if you haven't trained your body to use breath as a tool.

Breathwork must be practiced daily during calm times—just like you would exercise a muscle. The science is there: regular breathwork lowers stress and inflammation, and helps you access calm when it counts.

3. Stop Focusing on Behavior—Start Looking at Expectations

When kids are melting down, resisting, or acting "difficult," we often zero in on the behavior. But what if the problem isn't the behavior—it's the expectation?

Every behavior is a form of communication. And when the demand we place on a child outpaces their skills—whether that's emotional regulation, communication, or problem-solving—we're going to see stress behaviors.

So instead of thinking, "*He's stalling bedtime again. He knows I'm exhausted. He's doing this on purpose,*" try reframing: "*My child is having a hard time going to bed. I wonder what's getting in the way?*"

And before you jump to conclusions—ask. Be curious. Even young children can surprise you with what they share when we take the time to connect instead of correct.

Final Thought: You Are the Water

If you're here, reading this, it's because you care deeply. You want to raise secure, resilient kids. But sometimes, the best thing you can do for your child isn't another sticker chart or timeout or toy rotation.

It's checking the water.

What's the environment you're creating? How are you showing up in the relationship?

Mindful-ish® parenting is not about perfection—it's about progress. About noticing when the tank gets murky and doing your part to clear it. About taking care of yourself so you can take care of them.

Regulate yourself. Get curious. Breathe. And remember—you're doing better than you think.

Ready to Go Deeper?

Join Coach Franny this summer for her six-week online parenting series, *From Chaos to Connection*—designed to help you stabilize your tank, strengthen your relationships, and build tools that last. Participate from anywhere, on your schedule, with recorded sessions available if you can't attend live.

And coming this July, educators and service providers can join a brand-new four-week program with me through Reflex Integration Through Play™—a powerful brain-body approach to working with children. I'm a certified provider and co-instructor of the *RITP at School* program, and I'm excited to bring this work to those who support kids every day.

Want to see which program is right for you or your team?

[Click here to book a free discovery call with me](#)—I'd love to connect and help you find the best fit.

Don't miss the chance to grow, connect, and reset—Mindful-ish® style.