

*Becoming a **PRO-ACTIVE** Parent **

By Cliff Crain, MFT

You often hear people talk about being “pro-active” but it has been my experience that most people only have only a vague sense of what the concept really means, and even fewer actually have developed the life-habit of being proactive. So, let’s explore the meaning of being “**pro-active**” as a parent.

As you read this, try to stand apart from yourself. Project your awareness up into the corner of the room, so you can see yourself reading. Next, think about how you are feeling right now. What mood are you in? So, with these simple exercises you can think about your thinking and become aware of what you are feeling.

To understand “pro-activity”, we must first become aware that we are not our feelings or our thoughts. We must see that our feelings and thoughts do not mandate our behaviors. We have feelings, which have grown out of our life experiences, but we are more than our feelings and we can always choose what we are going to do with our feelings. For example, we can be/feel very angry and elect to just sit with that feeling and experience it fully. This may sound strange or even impossible, but it is do-able and often is the best course of action. Once we calm down, and the higher reasoning functions of the frontal cortex are back on-line, we can choose our response to the situation that created our angry feelings.

We are not our thoughts. This may come as a surprise to many, but the mere fact that we are able to reflect upon our thoughts separates us from the natural reactivity of the animal world. We are capable of being “self-aware” and standing apart and examining our own thought process. Many meditation techniques are, in fact, exercises that help us to understand our thinking processes. We can evaluate our thinking and the underlying beliefs that inform us, our mind-maps. In this process, we are even able to update our maps and see things from a different perspective. We can change our paradigm, our worldview.

Most of us think about the world using the stimulus-response theory of interaction. This means our reality map, upon which we evaluate our experience, is seen through the lens of this theory. Our language then reflects this belief when we say things like “He made me mad” or “I may have over-reacted but it is her fault.” Statements like these (and thoughts like these) grow out of thinking in the “stimulus-response” paradigm.



What we are saying is that something “out there” caused our re-action. The pro-active paradigm evaluates everything a little differently.

THE PRO-ACTIVE PARADIGM:

When we use this model to view our experience, we see that we ALWAYS have choices. This does not mean our choices are always easy, but, nonetheless, we can do more than merely re-act to our circumstances. The pro-active model sees that between the

stimulus and the response is our freedom to choose. It looks something like the model in the box below:



In this model, we can imagine the exact same stimulus (e.g. our child yelled at us) and instead of blindly “re-acting” (e.g. yelling back because he made us angry) we can pause long enough to see our freedom to choose our response. Using our four unique human gifts, we might respond in any of the following ways:

- #1 notice our anger (self awareness) and take a brief time out, and/or
- #2 think of what the loving response might be (imagination) and choose to be understanding and compassionate, and/or
- #3 remember how much we love our child (conscience) and take a brief time out to reflect, and/or
- #4 remember our commitment to stay calm (will power) and take a brief time out to reflect.

These are just examples how a person can tap into his/her unique human gifts and exercise the freedom to choose in a give situation. We are, by nature, proactive. If we function more re-actively, it is because we have chosen, by conscious decision or by default, to empower our circumstances to control us. This means we have chosen to live using the stimulus–response model.

Parents who do this become re-active: affected/controlled by their physical environment. When their children are calm and well behaved, these parents feel good and are in a good mood. When their children mis-behave, these parents get angry, and feel justified in their reactivity.

Proactive parents, on the other hand, carry their own sense of well-being within them. When their children misbehave, pro-active parents realize that they *ALWAYS* have the freedom to choose their response in every situation. This allows them to tap into their awareness of how to be the best loving-parent they know how to be. They can then choose how best to respond. Good luck!



* Ideas about “Becoming a Pro-Active Parent” are from Stephen Covey’s powerful book on parenting, **The Seven Habits of Highly Effective Families**. Covey’s book is highly recommended.