

The Parenting by Connection Reader



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Articles by
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Biting, Pushing, Pulling Hair Helping Children with Aggression

By Patty Wipfler

Has your child ever lashed out and hurt someone? Has she ever been bothered by another aggressive child? If your answer is "Yes," join the crowd! Almost all of us struggle with understanding and helping our children when they hurt others, and when they are hurt by other children. It's a shock to us the first time our sweet sons and daughters suddenly bite someone, or throw something at the new baby in the family. Here are some guiding principles for understanding and relieving children's aggression, so they can relax and enjoy their friends and siblings.

First, it's important to understand that **children don't want to attack others**. They'd much rather have fun and feel safe and loved. They play well when they feel connected.

When children lose their sense of connection, they feel tense, frightened, or isolated. In this "emotional emergency," they may lash out at other children. **Children don't intend to be mean.** In fact, acts of aggression aren't under the child's control.

When a child loses her sense of connection, strong feelings flood her mind. For instance, on an ordinary morning with loving and typically rushed parents, the child's inner voice of emotion might go like this:

"Mommy's gone. She doesn't like me--she rushed me out of bed and ordered me to eat my breakfast. She cooed at the baby, but she doesn't like me. I feel awful. Here comes Joey. He looks happy. How come he gets to feel happy?" At this point, the child may lash out.

If a child feels safe, he will show how he feels

When it feels safe enough to show their feelings, children who feel upset don't hurt anyone. They feel a bond with their parent or caregiver, and run to the nearest loved one for help. **They cry, and release the knot of fear and grief they feel.** The adult who listens and allows the child to "fall apart" gives the child a huge gift—enough caring and love to allow the child to heal from the feelings that make life hard for him.

If a child doesn't feel safe, he may signal for help by becoming aggressive

The child who lashes out feels sad, frightened, or alone. He doesn't look frightened when he is about to bite, push, or hit. But his fears are at the heart of the problem. Fear robs a child of his ability to feel like he cares about others. His trusting nature is crusted with feelings: *"No one understands me, and no one cares about me."* If you watch carefully, you will see that this kind of feeling drains a child's face of flexibility and sparkle in the seconds before he lashes out.

Children get these feelings of isolation, no matter how loving and close we parents are. Some children are only occasionally frightened and aggressive. Some children have an abiding sense of fear and desperation that comes from circumstances beyond anyone's control. Children acquire fears from medical crises, sudden unexplained tensions, a lack of warm parental attention, or from experiences like parents fighting or a loved one going away. A deeply frightening time in a child's past can create a habit of aggression.

Parents and caregivers have the power to help an aggressive child. A child's aggression can't be erased by logic, "Time Out," or enforcing "logical consequences." The knot of intense feelings inside the child isn't touched by reasoning or punishment and is out of the child's control, once he begins to feel disconnected.

A child's aggression will melt when someone stops the behavior by moving close and offering a warm connection. Then, listening helps heal the hurt. The child will either laugh or cry, and might tremble, perspire, or struggle mightily. The adult provides a safe connection and the time the child needs to release the fear he feels. The crying and physical struggling and perspiring he does get his limbic system (the part of his brain that sounds emotional alarms when he feels frightened) back in working order by providing an outlet for those unmanageable feelings.

Here are some simple steps you can follow to help a child who becomes aggressive. These measures will, over time, drain the feelings that cause the aggression, and will help the child feel closer to you and much more flexible in his play with other children.

Know yourself and your child

- **Ask someone to listen to you while you talk about the feelings you have about the child's aggression.** Hurtful behavior kicks up lots of feelings--fears, anger, guilt--that freeze our warmth and make us react

in ways that frighten our child further. Talking to a good listener, and offloading your own feelings, will prepare you to help your child.

- **Observe.** Under what conditions do the child's fears overtake her? Is it when Mommy has been at a meeting the night before? When there have been arguments at home? When other children crowd close? When left to play with a sibling in a separate room? Generally, you can come up with a good guess as to when your child might lose his sense of connection and become aggressive.
- **Give up the hope that, "this time it might not happen."** Mental preparation is important. If your child bites you suddenly when you're doing rough and tumble play, then every time you play this way, be mentally prepared for biting to occur!

Intervene, then listen when unhappy feelings overcome the child

- **Intervene quickly and calmly** to prevent a child's hand from landing in someone's hair, or her teeth from fastening onto you, or her fist from landing on her friend. Because she's not in control of her behavior, she needs *you* to keep her from hurting someone. You can say something like, "I can't let you hurt Jamal," or, "Oh, no, I don't think I want those teeth any closer," while holding her forehead a few inches above your shoulder.
- **Give her eye contact, a warm voice, and kind physical contact.** She needs some sign that it's safe to show you her feelings. You can say things like, "I know you don't feel good," "I'm right here and I'll keep things safe for you," "Something's not right. Can you tell me about it?" "No one's mad at you. I want to stay with you right now."
- **Don't expect your child to be reasonable.** She probably won't use words to tell you how she feels. Her body language and tone while crying or screaming will speak to you. Show your caring as you let her writhe with upset, cry, and struggle. Keep both of you safe by managing her movements when you need to—a hand on her wrist so she can't grab your glasses, or an arm around her waist so she can't kick your legs. When she's finished, she will feel relieved and close to you.
- **Don't lecture or explain.** Even very young children know right from wrong. But when they are wild with feelings, they can't listen to their own best thinking, or yours. After the unhappy feelings are gone, they will remember, on their own, the important principles you have taught them.

What if you arrive on the scene too late, and your child has already hurt someone?

- **Make things safe immediately.** Take away the toys being thrown, or open the child's fingers to release her sister's hair.
- **Don't blame, shame, or punish.** These actions further frighten children, and further isolate them. They add to the load of hurt that makes children aggressive.
- **Decide who you are going to listen to first.** Both the aggressor and the victim need your help. You will be more effective if you concentrate on one child at a time, giving just a moment to the other child. Try to go to the aggressor as often as you go to the victim. Of course, the victim needs someone to check the damage done, and to care. If it's the aggressor you are going to focus on, you can tell the child who was hurt, *"I'm sorry. I know that hurt. I'm going to spend a minute here with you. Then I need to see Marla and help her--she must be pretty upset to do this to you."* You might want to try keeping the crying child close to you while you attend to the aggressor child, although it will be harder to keep thinking straight.
- **Remember that children who hurt others don't want to do it. Losing control makes them feel guilty and even more separate than before.** Guilt erases the child's ability to look like he cares. The "I don't care" look is deceiving--underneath, the child is heartbroken that she became so desperate.
- **Make generous contact.** It helps children connect if you apologize for not having kept things safe. You can say, *"I'm sorry I didn't see that you were upset with Ginger. It's my job to make sure things are safe. I know you didn't want to hurt her."*
- **If you child can cry or tantrum at this point, healing has begun. Listen.** Sometimes, your presence breaks the crust of isolation and the child's bad feelings can pour out. The feelings that she expresses are the root cause of the problem. She will probably be showing feelings of anger toward you, or fear of touch and closeness. These fearful responses indicate that your child feels safe with you, and trusts you to handle her wildest, scariest feelings. Let her feel intensely for as long as it takes. She'll decide when she's done enough.
- **Sometimes, a child who has hurt someone can't feel anything.** The feelings of guilt button a child up tight. She doesn't feel safe at all. Your best course of action is to make contact with her by spending some moments--perhaps five or ten--paying attention and doing what she wants to do. This isn't rewarding your child for "bad" behavior. Instead, you are

helping your child to reconnect. She has feelings she needs to offload, and in a short while, she will have an upset that gives you another chance to help. She won't be able to find her favorite toy, or will hate how you cut her toast. The little upset gives her a chance to do the crying she couldn't do earlier.

- **Encourage her to come to you when she's upset.** Children don't do this easily when they carry a big knot of tension, but offering the idea that you want her to ask for help indicates the direction things will go in over time, after many cries have released some of her fears.
- **Spend playtime with her and elicit laughter when you can.** Connecting with a warm adult in play can be a powerful means of keeping a child's sense of closeness alive. It's that sense of fun and closeness that will help her stay on a good track with her friends and siblings.

All in all, remember that an aggressive child is a frightened child. Don't believe the paper-thin crust of behavior that he has adopted to protect his tender heart. Something has happened to frighten him, and he's managing as best he can. He's waiting for someone, possibly you, to move in close and ask him what the matter is, to listen, and to tell him he's good even when he feels bad. Here's how it works:

My friend has a 6-year-old, Francisco, who has recently become quite aggressive with other children. I've known him since he was two weeks old. He has adopted a tough, "I don't care!" attitude. He is verbally demanding, and this scares his mother and puts off other adults. It gets him in trouble in play, isolates him, and has the potential to turn into a chronic bully pattern. Sometimes he'll yell things like "Why don't you just kill me!" which has confused and alarmed his family. I was invited to hang out with him for a weekend. He was happy I was there.

From the moment he woke up Saturday morning he took every opportunity to play hard. We did lots of roughhousing, wrestling, physical contests, racing each other, hide and seek, and time on the trampoline. I tried many Playlistening strategies. I bungled my way through various games, in which he "got the best of me." He laughed a lot. We made a good connection. Then he asked that we invite a younger neighbor friend to hang out with us. We explored the neighborhood, and ended up at a local schoolyard. He and his friend tried hard to kill some squirrels, throwing rocks at them. They laughed. I worried about the squirrels, but took the chance that they would be OK, and didn't set limits there. The squirrels were faster than the boys.

Later, Francisco began to be more directive as he played with his younger friend. He began to show his "tough guy" behavior. Tension mounted between the boys. The younger one protested, gave in to Francisco's demands, but became less and less cooperative.

Finally I went over, put my arm around Francisco, and told him I wasn't going to let him act that way. I told him that he couldn't continue his yelling, screaming, and bullying. I knew the way he was acting did not reflect his family's values. "That's not the way we interact with others" was what I communicated. He protested, wanted to leave and was upset with me. I told him I wanted him to stay nearby, for us to talk. I reminded him that I really liked him a lot. He began to fight me, and eventually, to cry.

While he was crying, I said, "Francisco, I know you. I know you didn't used to talk that way to other kids. I know you didn't used to fight with them like that. I've never seen you act like that. What happened to make you choose to act like that?" He cried really hard for a long time, and kept fighting. I encouraged him to push hard, to fight, and kept telling him that it was great he could use the resistance I was offering to work hard on these feelings. I kept asking every now and then, "What happened?" He kept saying "I want my mom (who was sitting close by) to hold me!" After awhile, he said emphatically, as he burst into tears, "I'm not going to tell you! Let go of me!" I responded, "Not just yet." I stayed and listened some more—we were getting to the bottom of something. I kept gently asking what had happened, and he protested as long as he needed to.

Then he told me the incident that had frightened and hurt him. Another boy had been hard on him in exactly that way, and had hit him in the face. He hadn't been able to fight for himself. He cried more, very close to me. Long hard sobs of grief came out. It ended well. He has been softer since then. Later that evening while out with another family, another young friend had big feelings about wanting his mom to take him home "right now!" Francisco was very supportive while the young friend was crying and protesting. He was very sweet and reassuring to this young one. I think he has more crying to do before he can be entirely free of the feelings that make him act tough. But we did a good bit. —a father in Albuquerque, NM.

Helping Young Children Sleep

By Patty Wipfler

Most children struggle at some time or another with sleeping through the night. Of course, when infants are quite young, they need to wake several times in the night, eat, and be reassured that their parents are close and all is well in their world. The need for reassurance, in addition to nourishment, is even stronger if a baby has had difficult times in his life already. I won't discuss helping infants with feelings that may stem from early life struggles in this article. I'll focus on helping healthy children six months of age and older with the patterns of interrupted sleep that sometimes appears.

After about six months, unless your baby is ill or underweight, he is capable of sleeping through the night much of the time. Children vary greatly in how much sleep they thrive on, but by this age, most parents can hope for a good 7-hour stretch of sleep without waking. However, many children experience feelings that prevent them from sleeping through the night at least some of the time. Most parents do the expedient thing to get their little one back to sleep--they allow him to nurse or have a bottle, and hope for another few hours of rest. For some babies and lucky parents, there's a slow progression toward less waking in the night that ends in all-night sleeping. But other parents put in months of patient accommodation, followed by frustration and mounting stress because neither they nor their child can sleep through the night.

Children need us to respond to them when they waken in the night

We parents want to help our children acquire the ability to sleep through the night, but are faced with a recommended method that requires letting the child cry, frightened and alone in his own bed, without response from us. Many parents can't bear to do this. It doesn't sit well with our instinct to help, to care, and to be trustworthy and available to help when our child needs reassurance.

We parents *do* need to respond every time a child cries. Children need to know that we will be there for them, especially when their whole system is telling them that something is amiss.

The “I’ll listen until you can fall asleep” approach

There is an effective and supportive way to handle a child's sleep troubles. This approach allows your child to dissolve the tensions that wake him, and allows you to help him recover from those tensions and sleep peacefully. It's not an easy approach, but it's loving, respectful, and it works.

The principles on which this approach is based are these:

- When children can't sleep through the night (and there are no health or developmental issues such as a fever or a growth spurt), **the cause is most likely some kind of emotional tension** that bubbles up in the child's mind during sleep.
- Children's tensions are relieved when an adult can stay close and listen to how the child feels. **The crying, struggling, perspiring, and trembling that children do actually heal their fear and grief, if a parent can be reassuring and attentive.** Crying and active struggling and trembling are the child's own best way of getting free of feelings he harbors. Those feelings have sprung from some difficult, unwell, or restless time, either recent or long past.
- **Children's systems are built to offload feelings of upset immediately and vigorously.** And our training as parents is to stop them from offloading their feelings! We are taught to give them pacifiers, food, rocking, patting, scolding, and later, time outs and spanking, if the crying or screaming goes on for more than a minute. We are taught to work against the child's own healthy instincts to get rid of bad feelings immediately. So our children store these upsets, and try many times a day to work them out, usually by testing limits or having meltdowns over small issues. If they can't offload them during the day, the feelings bother them in the night.

This is why nursing or offering a bottle to a child who wakes doesn't keep him from waking again. In fact, as a child's storehouse of feelings gets fuller he wakes more often, trying to have a good cry. Parents try to solve the problem by offering food or allowing the child to sleep with them as a way to pat the feelings down again. But over time, the pent-up tension inside the child becomes trouble for everyone. (Healthy families in many cultures allow children to sleep with parents, but the good effects of sleeping close together can be negated if no one sleeps well in that arrangement.)

To help your child, and yourself, help him release the feelings that wake him up

This is easier to do during the day than at nighttime, so a good strategy to try first is to listen to your child's feelings of upset when they arise during the day. Listen when you're sure that the issue he's crying about doesn't involve hunger. Simply get close, say loving things to him, offer warm eye contact and gentle touch, and let him cry until he feels better.

Children pick lots of little pretexts to open the door to releasing feelings. They will cry about a shirt being put on over their heads, about having

a shampoo, about you moving six steps away to do the dishes, or about how their mittens don't fit into their coat sleeves quite right. When a big cry begins, stay close, pay warm attention to the feelings they have, and don't try to fix the little thing that upset them. Just hear how they feel about it for as long as you can.

When children feel you listening, they often cry harder. Your loving attention is reassuring enough to let them tackle big feelings of fear and grief. It will take courage on your part to trust that your child knows what he's doing as he cries that hard with your support. You'll see good results afterward. A passionate cry in your arms will help your child relax, trust you, and see the world as a safer place. All he needs is for you to be close and confident that all is well.

If daytime listening isn't enough to ease night waking, listen at night

For nighttime work on fears, here are the measures that work very well. You may need to take a week to set things up so you can get an extra nap during the day, or buy earplugs for the rest of the family, or warn the people in the apartment next door (earplugs for them might be a thoughtful touch).

- When your child wakes the first time, go to him and turn on a low light so he can see you and see that he's safe. **Make close physical and eye contact.**
- **Tell him it's OK to go back to sleep**, and it's not time to nurse or have a bottle or come into bed with you right now. Tell him that all is well. "I'm right here, son." "You're safe as safe can be." "You have everything you need, darling." "I'm not going to go away." Offer warm touch, but don't bring him into your arms immediately. Keep gently moving him toward lying down again.
- **Listen to him cry.** If he trembles, writhes away from you, arches his back, shuts his eyes tight, and makes lots of motion, things are going well. Those signs indicate that he's offloading the fears that won't let him rest. It looks and sounds awful, but he's using a powerful healing process, one he was born to use, and he'll be able to sleep better afterward. Some children will work on their feelings for a whole hour before they relax and fall fast asleep. As you support him while he works through his feelings, your child absorbs your love.
- **Once he is crying vigorously, you may be able to bring him into your arms and hold him while he cries.** After a few moments of crying, many children have grabbed onto the feelings they need to release, and being held by you doesn't distract them from crying hard. Other children stop crying the moment they are held close. If your child stops crying in your arms, remind him that it's time to go back to sleep, and

move slowly toward putting him back to bed. Keep moving until he remembers the feeling he's working through.

- **Allow your child to struggle as he offloads his fears.** Children working through their fears usually cry without many tears, look terrified as they cry, and struggle constantly, as though they want to get free of your embrace. However, if you let them go, it breaks the safety they need to keep working on the feelings. They don't need to be held tightly. They need to struggle mightily, with you giving them a "corral" in which to act powerfully. The feelings they are working through may be connected to earlier times when they felt both frightened and helpless. They **must** struggle while they cry, to counteract the memory of being both helpless and frightened.
- **Alternate between listening and accepting his feelings, and reassuring him that he's safe.** While your child is crying, and perhaps struggling, he's working through an "emotional memory" of a hard time in his past. It will help him greatly to feel you calm, confident and close. Hearing your voice, now and then, will also help him. Here are the things you can say that will show him that you are there for him, reminding him that he's in no present danger.

"I'm right here." "You're safe, son." "Whatever frightened you is over. It's never going to happen again." "After you sleep, you'll wake up, and we'll have a good day." "Your bed is safe." "I'm watching over you every minute." "I know this is hard, but I'm right here." "It's safe to go to sleep."

If your child's feelings escalate when you reassure him, that's a good sign. The healing process is working well—you are pouring your support and a sense of safety in, so that his emotional memories of deep fear and grief can make a noisy exit.

- **Remember as you listen that your child has everything he needs.** He has you watching over him, he has your warmth, and he is safe right next to you. He can't tell all is well because of feelings inside of him, not because of something lacking in the present moment.
- **Allow him to cry until he either is happy to be put back to bed, or until he falls asleep in your arms.** This can take anywhere from a few minutes to an hour or more, depending on how many feelings have been pressing on him.
- **Observe his behavior the next day.** Generally, children who get a good chunk of crying done are able to make visible gains in confidence, closeness, and relaxation in the presence of others. Sometimes you'll see gains in their physical skill and courage. Sometimes, after a parent has listened at length for the first time, the child's instincts say, "At last!"

They're listening!" and he finds ways to set up another big cry the next morning. If you can listen again, his load will be lightened once more. It might take several listening "sessions" before a child is able to sleep better, but you will see some positive changes in his functioning that will tell you he's making progress.

Listening to a child's feelings works over time

How many nights you'll need to listen to your child cry depends on factors you can't know ahead of time. There's no way to gauge the size and depth of the feelings he carries. Children who've had stressful times before or during birth, or in infancy sometimes ask for help with their fears in the middle of the night for months. (Some people call this "night terrors.") Other children need to be listened to only occasionally, especially during and after illnesses, or when there's increased stress in their lives. In any case, your child will become more confident, will feel closer to you, and relate better to others if you can listen to his feelings in the night at least some of the time.

You may feel the need to cry, too, while your child is crying about his feelings. In fact, our children's crying often brings up the strongest feelings we have! This is because most of us seldom got a chance to cry away the hurt feelings we carried when we were young. When our children cry, something inside us says, "Hey! I have big feelings too!" So finding another adult to talk with who won't be upset if your feelings spill over is an important part of preparing to help your child by listening. You'll be a better listener for having been listened to.

Here's one parent's experience of listening to a child's fears at bedtime

Working on sleep brings a great day at school

Delia had just turned three. She had changed child care situations recently, and was spending her days doing OK, but wasn't yet entirely comfortable in her new center, though it was well-run and had attentive staff. She "waited," in a sense, marking time until her parents came to pick her up. She also was having lots of trouble sleeping in her own bed at night.

Her parents decided to try to help her with her fears of being in her own room. They played with her, cuddled, and made a special effort to connect with her before bedtime, to insure that she had a full sense that they were on her side. Then, they read her the customary story, and said, "OK we're going to go now. Good night!" She raised her usual complaints and began to feel fearful. They said, "We'll just be in the living room. You are safe." She began to protest, but her Mom, whose attention Delia most wanted at bedtime, moved toward the door. Her Dad stayed at her bedside.

She began to cry for her Mommy. Her Mom stopped and turned to face her, reassuring Delia that she was safe, and that Mommy wasn't going to go far. Her Dad held her in his arms and she cried for a long time. When she would stop crying, her Mom would say, "OK, I'm going to go a little farther now," and take another step toward the door. Delia would cry some more. Her mother inched out the door over the next half hour, listening to crying the whole time, until she was out of sight. Delia continued to cry. Her Mom talked to her, but stayed where she couldn't be seen. Then, her Dad began to get up. This brought more crying. It was a long "session," which ended with her crying until she fell asleep, with her Daddy part way out of the room. The parents had listened to her feelings, and had stayed close, but not so close as to stop her from fully feeling the gradual separation.

The crying had been so intense and had gone on so long that her parents were very worried about the effect it might have on her. She was so young, and seemed so fragile. They went to sleep almost sure they had done the wrong thing, and had put her through a hurtful and traumatic time. They worried about how to help her the next day.

But Delia woke up bright and eager to go to day care. She seemed fine, and her parents were relieved. When her Dad picked her up from day care that afternoon, the teacher made a point of seeking him out, and said, "You know, Delia had an amazing day today. She was outgoing, she set up games that included several of the children, and they all laughed a lot and had a great time. We've never seen her so lively and self-assured!" It was then clear how useful her big cry had been. It had relieved feelings about sleep, as well as feelings that had kept her on the outskirts of play every day. Delia had a few shorter cries about sleep in the next week or so, and then she could tell she was safe in her own bed.

Help for Toddlers When They Bite

By Patty Wipfler

Many toddlers go through a biting stage. They bite their Mommies and Daddies, or they bite other children, causing concern and sometimes quite a bit of emotional charge. This commonplace behavior has nothing to do with how “good” a child is, or how well he is parented. But the parents of children who are bitten become fierce defenders of their children. Their "I've got to protect my child" response can easily come across as, "Your child is bad," and can set off emotional waves that parents of the biter and the bitten are poorly equipped to handle.

Infants experiment with biting

Every infant experiments with biting. Babies bite their teething toys, their mommy's breast, their pacifier, or the fingers or shoulders of their parents. Usually, the parent's immediate flinch or cry of surprise communicates to the child that biting hurts, and after a few experiments, the child has learned enough about biting to move on. The experiments cease. There's nothing bad or wrong with these biting experiments: the baby is doing what he or she must do to learn.

It helps the learning process if the adult responds with a loud "Ouch! Please don't bite me," but doesn't blame, punish, or lecture the baby. The baby needs to experiment in order to learn, so a few painful moments will be necessary before the learning process has taken its course. Parents must guard their own safety with an infant who is exploring biting. For instance, it doesn't make sense to put your finger in the mouth of a baby who is exploring biting, unless he has no teeth!

Toddlers bite when they feel afraid or frustrated

By the time a child has reached toddler age, he has learned that biting hurts. Seldom is a bite from a toddler an experiment. You might think, "Well, if it hurts, why does he decide to do it?" I don't think toddlers actually decide to bite. They are generous beings at heart, and they don't want to hurt anyone. A toddler bites because a big wave of tension has flooded his brain. He doesn't plan this, and he doesn't know how to stop it. Toddlers' biting is like a sneeze or a cough--the body does it for internal reasons that don't easily come under control.

One of the main reasons toddlers bite is because they are feeling afraid or frustrated. When they haven't had their fill of close, relaxed time with their parents or caregivers, or when stress has risen in their lives, they may not have fully expressed their upsets through natural, normal outlets like crying and tantrums. We are taught to squelch their feelings, and they try to manage themselves emotionally. But the feelings, now stuck inside of them, can begin to rumble, and then suddenly flash, causing a child to bite.

Toddlers need an outlet for their feelings

Toddlers need chances to express their frustrations, fears, and other upsets on a daily basis. They want to be close to Mommy and Daddy, but mommies and daddies have to work, shop, fix meals, talk on the phone, and take care of other children. Toddlers in childcare want to be treasured by their caregivers, but caregivers have many children to consider. So tension builds, one little disappointing, scary or lonely moment at a time. A day's ordinary events can easily leave a toddler feeling upset and alone, although nothing an adult would consider difficult has happened.

For instance, if a parent has to go out to an evening meeting, a toddler doesn't understand her absence. He feels afraid and tries to cry, hoping to heal his fears and sadness in the arms of someone who loves him and will listen. But the well-meaning parent or baby sitter believes that he will feel better if he doesn't cry, and gives him a bottle or puts him to sleep. The next day in childcare, he bites a child. He tried to release his feelings of upset, but couldn't. So the feelings he tried to tuck away jump out in the form of biting. He doesn't know why, and he didn't choose to bite. He was simply too full of tension to function well.

Both current tensions and stored tensions can cause a child to bite

The tensions that drive toddlers to bite can arise from things that have recently happened. The birth of a sibling, the absence of a parent, witnessing violence on TV, a change in caregivers, or moving from one apartment to another are the kinds of things that can build enough tension to cause biting. The fact that a toddler has feelings that are being expressed in biting isn't the fault of the parent, or of the toddler. Biting is like a runny nose: it's common, it's not fun for the child or the parents, and it can affect other children adversely, but it's not a sign that anyone is "bad."

Sometimes, the most likely explanation for biting is that it's driven by feelings that come from events at the beginning of a child's life, rather than by current tensions. For instance, I know several toddlers who would bite or lash out at other children when there was no unusual stress that their parents could identify. Usually, this aggression would arise when these children were sitting or playing with others in close quarters. When we began to try to figure out what tensions might be operating, we found that each of these children had experienced a difficult birth. Each had been born after a long labor or after being stuck in the birth canal for some time. We guessed (with young children, guessing is the best one can do) that children crowding close might trigger very early feelings of being trapped and in danger.

Toddlers may also bite out of frustration. To be a toddler is to see a vast number of interesting things people do, and to think, "I want to do *that!*" The toddler doesn't know that he doesn't yet have the power or coordination to fully succeed. It is a hopeful and frustrating time of life. When a toddler's tantrums--the natural, healthy, and tension-relieving response to frustration--aren't allowed, a child's frustration can build until he can't stand to be close to other children. He bites or lashes out, because the buildup of frustration inside him has had no permissible outlet.

You don't need to know the reason a child is biting

Guessing why a child bites can be helpful in predicting when this behavior will arise, so that you can be close at hand to intervene to help the child and protect other children. But to help a child, you don't need to understand the source of the tension. Whether you have thought of a likely cause or not, your helpful actions will be the same.

Offer your attention when a child has bitten

Biting doesn't release a child's inner tension. A child feels much worse after he's bitten someone, even if he appears to be indifferent. Hurting someone adds to his load of upset, though the guilt he feels makes him look like he doesn't care. Inside, he's more frightened than before. When a child has bitten someone, get close. Tell him gently that you're sorry you didn't get there in time to keep things safe. Then, move so that you can look into his eyes, and ask him if he can tell you how he feels. You won't usually get words of explanation, but you will get a child who feels so badly that he can't look at you, and can't connect. He will usually begin to writhe and squirm.

If you keep gently trying to make eye contact, and telling him you want to be with him right now, a child will often be able to move into releasing feelings through crying or a tantrum. Sometimes a child will begin to laugh, rather than cry or storm, as he tries to wiggle away. Laughter is an important part of the tension release process. There are other feelings beneath the laughter, and they will surface if you continue to connect and stay close.

All the child needs to keep releasing the tension that caused him to bite is your kindness, and your attempt to connect. You don't need to be the child's parent to be the one to help. Any nearby, caring, patient adult is a good person to intervene. A child over the top with tension needs a listener, any listener. If the listener isn't his parent, he is likely to cry about wanting his parent. Missing Mommy or Daddy may in fact be the feeling at the root of his biting behavior.

Be proactive to help the child release tension: do Special Time and Staylistening

Special Time

The first step to helping a child who bites is to strengthen his ability to feel your attention and love. Special Time is an ideal tool for this step. You set a length of time, anywhere from 3 to 20 minutes, tell him how long it will be, and then get close. Offer your warmth, interest, and eye contact, and play the way the child wants to play. He may not look at you, or even acknowledge your presence, but don't waver. Keep offering gentle touch and eye contact. If he finds a way to laugh with you (without you tickling him), try to keep the laughter going, because laughter releases tension and helps children feel safe and understood. When the time is over, let him know you loved playing with him, and that there will be another Special Time soon.

Special Time, done daily or several times in a week, will encourage a child to show you his feelings as they arise. He may start crying when you leave, or have a tantrum instead of sulking when he doesn't get an extra cookie. This is progress, although some people might interpret it as "regression." Special Time has warmed up the relationship. Your child bursts into tears or tantrums because he feels close enough to you to hope that you'll fold him in your arms and say, "I'm sorry you feel so upset. I'll listen." He's letting feelings spill, instead of storing them where they will cause trouble later.

Staylistening

Children who have begun to bite are signaling that they have big feelings that need to be heard. These feelings are carried to the surface by small pretexts such as not wanting to get into the car seat, not wanting to undress for a bath, or not being able to give up playing in order to go to day care. The child wants and needs someone to lovingly listen while he releases his upsets through crying or tantrums.

Staylistening gives the child this chance. When the parent or caregiver notices that feelings are about to erupt, the child will benefit if the adult moves close, drops other expectations for a time, and listens with warmth. Children know exactly how to unload tension. Parents and caregivers have the opportunity to accept the child and listen to his upset, so that crying and tantrums can do the wonderful but time-consuming job of dissolving the feelings that are at the root of biting and other difficult behavior.

As parents and caregivers, we need to train ourselves to think, "Oh, good, a tantrum. He trusts me, and he's had quite a day!" or "Ahhh. She's going to cry for awhile now. It'll be nice to take some time to connect with her--I've been rushing all day long."

Used consistently, Special Time and Staylistening will undo the knot of tension that causes a child to bite. It may take awhile--toddlers usually have a good number of upsets and fears stored away by the time they begin to bite. But as you listen, you will see them begin to relax, to play more freely, and to trust you with more of the emotions they want to shed.

Toddlers may also bite when times are sweet and close

Sometimes, a parent will be snuggling and playing up close with their delighted toddler, when their child will bite them out of the blue. It's a shock, and feels like an insult! After it happens a second time, parents become wary of playing at close range. They can't understand why their own child bites them during the sweetest of playtimes.

The chance to snuggle and laugh and have a parent beam at them delightedly is deeply reassuring for a child. He absorbs as much of the parent's love and delight as he can. When his little cup is running over with connection and pleasure, if he's carrying an inner knot of fear that he hasn't been able to address, it will grab him, and signal its presence by driving the child to bite.

A bite in the middle of warm, close play means, *"I'm ready to tell you about some big feelings, and I need you to help me get to them."*

When you have been bitten, it's smart to react with as little fluster as possible. Hold your child close, and say something like, "Honey, I can't let you bite me. Tell me what's on your mind." Offer eye contact, and stay very close. The feel of your attention and your willingness to listen will help your child progress from biting but having no feelings about it (fears make most people, big and small, numb to feelings) to feeling upset, panicked, or frustrated. Stay close and supportive: your attention helps the child focus on the feelings he needs to express and heal. Your attention is the balm that, when he's finished, will fold deep into his heart.

Hold a child safely on the edge of biting

Once your child has bitten you in the midst of affectionate play, be on the lookout for him to lunge for you again when you play with warmth and closeness. If you can catch a child who is on the verge of biting you, and put your hand on his forehead, you'll be able to keep yourself safe and he'll be able to notice the feelings that drive him to bite. Gently hold his head, inches away from

you, and tell him, "I'm not going to let you bite me, dear," in a tone that lets him know you're ready to help him. Offer your support and attention, and don't let your child change the subject. He will keep trying to bite, and either laugh hard and release tension safely that way, or begin to cry hard because he finally has the safety he needs—he can't hurt you, and his feelings are welcomed by you. Your support helps him feel and release the fear that's bothering him.

It never helps a child who bites to be shamed, blamed, or punished

A child can't help that his feelings are packed in so tightly that biting occurs. He has tried to cry, and tried to tantrum, but has not yet gotten the support he needs to release feelings of fear or frustration. You can help, whether you're a parent, a caregiver, a grandparent, or a friend. He will drop all biting behavior, just as soon as the release of feelings allows him to relax and feel safe. You have a good child. He wants to play well. He wants to have a close, relaxed connection with you and each of his friends.

What's the Cure for Whining?

By Patty Wipfler

If we wanted to make a list of the things children do that irritate their parents, we'd find whining near the top! It's a behavior that every child tries sooner or later. Some children fall into whining and can't seem to climb back out. By the time a parent decides to search for advice about handling whining, he is usually fed up.

When a child is whining, filling his stated request probably won't change his emotional climate for long. Inside a whining child, the weather is cloudy, with a storm on the horizon. Filling his request might gain a parent a few moments of peace, but the child's overall mood sinks back into a tone of, "*I am unhappy*" soon again. Sending a child off to his room or punishing him for whining won't improve the situation either. He might come back from punishment or time out a quieter person, but he won't feel good inside. He will probably find ways to balk, to stir up difficulties with others, or to zone out. This persistent unhappiness is hard on parents. When we take the time and energy to try to solve a problem, we parents feel insulted when it doesn't stay solved!

Whining is communication

We'd like to offer you a fresh way of looking at whining, and some interesting solutions to try! We start with the observation that, like every other behavior children have, whining is important communication. We parents wish the message would come in some other form--any other form! But whining is news from your child, hot off the press. The headline is, "*I feel alone! I feel powerless!*"

Usually, whining happens shortly after a child's sense of connection to their parent or caregiver has broken. The ordinary things parents must do, like feeding little sister, cooking dinner, or talking to a friend on the phone, can eat away at a child's sense that he's connected and cared about. For small children in a big world, feeling disconnected gnaws at their spirits. They flash a signal for help, "*I wannaaaa cooookkkiiiiiee!*" It comes with a miserable expression and a body that can barely move.

Once a child feels disconnected, any small task can bring up jumbo-sized feelings of powerlessness. Having to get dressed when they want to stay in their pajamas, having to brush their teeth when they'd rather play with the cat, and having to say goodbye and go to school or day care can bring on whining.

A whining child has real needs

A whining child probably won't be satisfied by the attempt you make to help, but he *does* have a real need. **He needs you.** Not just the things you do. He needs to feel connected to you. Only a sense of connection can mend that awful out-of-

sorts feeling he has that's bothering him. Children are built to feel close to the people they're with--close to their parents, their caregivers, their grandmas and cousins and friends. When they can feel close and cherished, they behave with confidence. When they don't feel close to anyone, their behavior goes haywire immediately.

Your child's feelings won't be rational

Comings and goings, moving from one activity to another, seeing you busy or preoccupied with other things, or having several siblings who compete for your attention all eat away at child's sense that all is sweet between you and him. You may actually be close and available, but sometimes even when we're most available, children can't feel our love or our caring, because the feeling, "*I'm alone*" has already taken over. Human feelings often paint an emotional picture that's far from the reality of the situation.

For instance, whining often happens toward the end of a sweet, close playtime during which you've done the things your child loves to do. You've done your utmost to make things good, but suddenly, you have a weakly child, who says, "*You never do anything I want!*" It's enough to make a parent feel, "I'm never taking you to the park again, if this is the way you behave!"

This happens because, at the prospect of the end of the good time, stored feelings of helplessness or loneliness crop up and take over. The feelings are irrational, but they lurk in the child's mind, and are brought into play by simple, everyday moments.

Your child isn't trying to manipulate you

When your child is whining, he isn't "out to get you." He doesn't really want you to give in to irrational requests. He's trying to signal that he needs your help. He has chosen something irrational to want, so that you *will* say "No," he *can* open up bad feelings and cry about them, and you *will* offer him the connection he is desperate to feel. Try to picture him saying, "*I wannnaaa cookkkiiee,*" but meaning, "*Please say 'No'—I need a good cry with your arms around me! Then I'll be able to feel your love again.*"

You can help your child connect again

Once your child regains a sense of connection with you or any other member of the family, he'll be able to take charge again. He'll ask for what he wants, without the "poor me" tone that would drive any parent nuts. Your energy will be well spent if you focus on rebuilding a connection with your child.

The tricky part about connecting with a child who is full of bad feelings is this: **his feelings need an outlet** before he'll be able to regain his confidence, his sense that you are on his side. Laughter, crying, and tantrums are typical ways children release bad feelings. A good laugh (not forced by tickling), a good cry (started without upset or punishment from you) or a good tantrum (parents don't love tantrums, but they are deeply effective) will cure that gnawing sense of helplessness or aloneness that causes whining.

Try filling your child's request once

A whining child does indeed need your attention for at least a moment or two. At first, you won't really know whether getting the thing he asks for will help him feel connected and strong again, or not. His request may seem reasonable to you—a drink of water, a snack, one more turn listening to his favorite music. If giving him the thing he wants makes sense to you, go ahead and try it once. But if more whining follows, you can be sure that the real problem is his emotional "weather." A storm is coming.

If he's not satisfied, offer closeness and a clear limit

The cold tone that most of us use when we say "No" serves to make a child feel more alone and adrift in an uncaring world. It deepens the emotional pit your child is stuck in. If you can say, "Nope, no more cookies! Maybe tomorrow!" with a big grin and a kiss on the cheek, your child receives contact from *you* in place of cookies. If he whines some more, you can come back and say, "Nah, nah, nah, nah!" and nuzzle into his neck, ending with a little kiss. If he persists, bring him still more affection, "*I'm your chocolate chip cookie! I'm all yours!*" with a big grin. Then throw your arms around him and scoop him up. At some point, the affection you're offering will tip him toward laughter or a tantrum.

Both results, as odd as it may seem, are great for him. **Laughter, tears, and tantrums help dissolve that shell of separateness that can enclose a child, as long as you listen and care.** After a good cry (you just keep sweetly saying, "No, Michael, no more cookies," until he's finished crying) or a good tantrum ("Yes, you really want one, I know, son.") or a good laugh ("I'm coming to give you big cookie kisses! Clomp, clomp, clomp!"), he will feel your love for him again.

If you can't be playful, be attentive

Playful moments don't come easily to us when our children whine! So if you can't find a way to nuzzle your child or respond with humor to his whiny requests, it will work well to come close and keep saying, with as little irritation as you can manage, "No." or, "You need to wait." Or "I can't let you do that." Or, "He's playing with it now." Or, "You'll get a turn, but not yet." Being very clear about the limit, and offering eye contact, a hand on his shoulder or knee, and whatever warmth you can muster, will help your child work himself into the cry, the

tantrum or the laughter he needs to do. Children know how to release feelings of upset. To get started, they need us to pay attention to them long enough to communicate that we'll stay with them through this rough patch.

Allow for laughter, tantrums or tears for as long as you have time and patience

Children whine when lots of feelings have backed up inside them. When they finally break into a good wail or thrash, they may be working through more than the frustration of not getting the cookie or the red truck. They may be draining the tension from issues like having a younger brother or sister, having to say goodbye to you every morning, or having just gotten over an illness. In any case, children need to shed bad feelings until they don't feel bad any longer. If the pile of feelings is high, this can take some time. Parents don't always have the time a child needs to finish the emotional task at hand. You may manage to listen to 15 or 20 minutes of crying, and then feel the need to stop your child. If your child's mood doesn't improve, he wasn't finished. It's as hard to have an unfinished cry as it is to be wakened in the middle of a deep sleep. He'll try to find a way to cry again soon. Something inside him knows that it will be good to finish the job. So listen again when you can. Your child will eventually finish his emotional project, and make gains in confidence that both of you can enjoy.

Listening time can help a parent keep perspective when whining begins

The hard part about trying the experiments above is that whining triggers all kinds of irrational feelings inside of us! When our feelings are surging, we don't think logically either. We react, usually behaving the way our parents reacted to our whining. The reactions we have to whining have been passed down through the generations in our families, each generation usually doing a milder version of reaction than the generation before it.

It takes mental preparation to offer a child limits with warmth

Whining kicks up feelings of resentment, exhaustion, and anger in parents. We feel like we're being manipulated. We feel helpless. **Every parent deserves someone to listen, over and over again; to how hard it can be to care for a child or children.** Nurturing children is work that stirs more emotions than almost any other project we'll ever undertake. So finding ways to be heard by another adult who won't get worried or try to fix things is an important part of our job as parents. The Hand in Hand booklet, *Listening Partnerships for Parents*, outlines how you can create a listening exchange for yourself, so you have a regular outlet for the feelings that build up over the days and weeks with your child.

Even ten minutes of "venting" with a friend, out of earshot of your child, will give you a better chance of moving toward your whining child with both limits and warmth.

Here's how it can work

I was playing with a mother and her nearly four year old boy, Joey, in the sandbox. A good friend of his, Sam, was also playing there, several feet away. Joey had played with a plastic construction helmet, and had put it down. He was busy with a tractor when Sam picked up the helmet and put it on.

Joey whined, "I want the hat! He took my hat!" He sat and looked at his mom, miserable. She got worried and said, "Do you want to go and talk to Sam about the hat?" and he whined, "I want you to go and talk to him. You do it." I invited the Mom to slow down the action, and indicated that she didn't need to fix the situation. He was clearly unhappy, and mad, too. A helmet wasn't going to fix the feelings he was carrying.

She did slow things down. She said, "OK, Joey, we can go and talk to him in a few minutes, but not now." He was able to begin to cry. She didn't try to pick him up or comfort him--he wasn't going to let her get that close. But she did stay right there, looking at him, and giving him permission to show his feelings. He cried, kept saying he wanted the helmet, and then proceeded to dig his feet into the sand again and again, not kicking sand, but pushing piles of it away from him and toward his Mom. She listened. He cried and kicked some more. He cried hard for several minutes, then he was finished. His face relaxed. He asked her to help him with some other project in the sand. He felt satisfied, and together, they continued playing. He didn't need the helmet any longer. And his requests from then on were direct and confident.

Healing the Hurt of Separation

By Patty Wipfler

Children thrive on connection with their parents. Their need for a sense of connection is strong and constant through childhood. It is this sense of safety and connection that allows children to learn at a great rate, to experiment and play, to fully enjoy themselves and others, and to trust in the goodness of the people they know.

A child's sense of connection and safety is easily broken. With infants and young children, a parent turning away to wash his hands or do the dishes is sometimes enough to break a child's sense that all is well. Because of this fragility, sooner or later, every child experiences some sad feelings about separation.

When a child feels upset by separation, there are two kinds of causes

- **The break in connection is happening now**, for instance, a parent goes to work, or must leave on a trip.
- **A small hint of separation kicks up stored feelings.** Putting a child to bed, going to another room, talking on the phone, or being rushed and overworked can open the floodgates to anxiety or grief that comes from earlier, more difficult separations. The parent is there, but the child is flooded with the feeling that he's alone.

Unresolved fears about separation are often at the root of difficult behaviors. When a child is loaded with feelings about separation, but doesn't get a chance to express them, he can't sense that he's safe. He can't think. He signals that he is "off track" when he

- Bites, hurts, or is forcefully "affectionate" with others
- Withdraws from others or excludes others when he plays
- Wanders from one activity to another without paying attention to what he is doing
- Whines or balks or is picky about everything
- Needs a special object to keep him from feeling upset

You can help a child work through his feelings about separation

Children need to cry fully and feel frightened about a separation that is about to happen, or has already happened. While they cry, they need the love and caring of someone who offers them warmth and safety. At first, it seems like the oddest idea—why on earth would you let a child cry hard for his Mommy or Daddy, when you could distract him or put him to sleep or jiggle him or pat him until he stopped? But over and over again, in thousands of situations, we have seen that children whose feelings are listened to become more confident, feel closer to their parents, and feel closer to the people who listened while they cried.

So here are the steps you can take to help a child actually heal the feelings he has about separation. As you take these steps, he'll develop his ability to explore his world and take advantage of the friendships he is offered. He'll also retain his trust in those closest to him.

- **Connect well.** Children need to feel close to someone before they feel safe enough to release their feelings. So the first step in helping a child with separation is to add more warmth and connection around the time when good-by must be said. A period of parent-child or caregiver-child Special Time that includes warmth, eye contact, and laughter will help strengthen the child's sense of connection.
- **Initiate the separation, then allow a long, tearful good-by.** Offer your warmth and support as the child cries, trembles, and struggles. This process of showing feelings fully with someone who will listen is natural, healthy, and deeply beneficial to the child. The longer the parent stays, the safer it will be for the child to show the feelings of desperation he or she has. The listener can be the parent who is leaving, or a caregiver, or both. In any case, these are the steps to follow:
 1. **Stay close, but not too close.** You want the child to feel your support, but also to feel the separation he is afraid of. Offer him eye contact and affection. If he burrows into you and stops crying, move him gently so that he could see you, if he looked. Your attention will help him feel the grief again.
 2. **Listen** to his tears and fears until he's finished, if you can. This is the fastest way for children to regain their confidence that all is well. For children who have big anxieties, crying with a safe person for thirty to sixty minutes at first is common. Repeated cries over several days or weeks may be necessary to relieve all of the child's fears.
 3. **Show confidence.** If you are the parent, tell him, "*Grandma (or the sitter, or childcare provider) will take good care of you. I'll be*

back. I'll always come back to you." If you are the childcare provider, tell him *"I'll watch over you until your Daddy comes back. When you feel better, we can play."*

4. ***Allow repeated good-byes.*** Let the parent linger, saying *"It's almost time for me to go. Are you ready to say good-bye?"* This allows the child to keep showing you how sad or desperate he feels. His feelings are being shed in the safest possible context—with the parent nearby.
5. ***Bring the caregiver close.*** Say, *"You're going to stay with Nana for awhile. Here she is. She'll take good care of you."* The child won't want to look at or touch the caregiver as he cries. The caregiver needs to know that the child isn't rejecting him or her personally. After a good cry, he'll be much more open to having fun with her.
6. ***Don't belittle the child or his feelings.*** His instinct to heal is at work. It's smart of him to build his confidence by unloading his fears.
7. ***At some other time when your child isn't present, find someone to listen to your feelings.*** What do you feel when your child is showing deep feelings? What part of your childhood does it remind you of? What were you afraid of as a child? A listener will help you sort out your own feelings about separation, so that your own fears grow smaller, and you can offer your child more reassurance that all is well.

When you can't listen through a long good-bye

If a child has repeated upsets over separation, but you or your caregiver aren't set up to listen to him cry at length at drop-off time, you have three basic options.

1. ***After a few moments of good-bye, leave.*** Let him keep crying in the arms of a supportive caregiver. With support and information, caregivers can sometimes give the child five or ten minutes of listening time or more, before moving him on to another activity. Often, however, the good of the group demands that a caregiver spread his or her attention more widely. So don't expect the caregiver to do all the listening work your child might need.
2. ***Begin the good-bye before you get there.*** Listen to your child cry before leaving home, before you get him out of the car, or outside the door at the caregiver's home or day care. This helps him get his emotional work done without placing what may be unworkable expectations on his caregiver.
3. ***Listen to your child's feelings at home.*** Children with feelings about separation often bring them up at a bedtime, when you go

into another room, or when you pay attention to someone else. You can gently, gradually insist on small separations in these situations, listening as long as your child needs to cry. These at-home cries will help improve his confidence when being left in the care of others. If you have a partner, enlist your partner to listen to your child while he cries about missing you. It will improve their relationship, and help your child feel more confident in general.

Although it may take repeated long listening times, you will see marked improvement in your child's confidence, his mood, and his ability to play with and trust others, as you listen to his feelings about separation.

Here's how it can work

My son was 2-1/2 when I first brought him to a home day care, run by a woman that I thought would be warm and good with him. He was not that happy to go, but was willing. After his first day, though, he greeted me very unhappily. He'd only been there two hours, but his diaper was dirty, and clearly had been dirty for most of the time. I took that as a sign that the caregiver had been too busy to pay much personal attention to him. He was upset, and told me his diaper was dirty, and he didn't like it. He said that she didn't play with him, and he didn't like her.

I took him home, changed and bathed him, and we had an OK afternoon, but the next day, he went into a huge struggling, fighting upset when I told him it was time to go back. He did not want to go. I had seen how Staylistening works, and I figured that if he were going to feel safe there, he needed to unload the feelings from that day, so I listened, and listened, and listened. Every once in awhile, I would tell him that she was a good person, and he could talk to her about what he wanted. He would fly into a very intense emotional reaction. We went on like that for over an hour. He wound down, and I decided that I wouldn't force him to go that day. His feelings were still very tender.

I proposed to take him the next day, and we had a very similar long, intense, desperate show of feelings, especially when I reassured him that he would be safe there, that she was good and had just been too busy that day. I kept letting him know that I thought he would be safe with her. He kept letting me know, in no uncertain terms, that he didn't want to go, and felt terrible about that place. I didn't take him that day either—this was his first experience in the care of others, and I didn't want to send him if he was going to feel threatened in any way.

The third day, we did the same thing. He did another hour or more of intense crying, not saying very much, but really showing how he felt. He did not want me to leave him there. But the fourth morning, I asked him if he wanted to go and tell her that he wanted his diaper changed when it was dirty, and he cried again about that idea. I encouraged him, saying that she is a good person, and

that she would listen to him. I said, "She wants to help you. She wants you to have a good time." (It's a good thing that I have faith in her. If I didn't know her, this would have been so much harder for me!) This time, after about ten minutes, his face cleared, and he said he did want to talk to her, but said, "You hold me!" I told him I would hold him. He got willingly into the car, we drove there, I picked him up, and carried him in to see her. I had phoned ahead to say that we were coming. She greeted us, and I told her that my son had something to say. He looked her straight in the eye, and said, "If I have a dirty diaper, you should change it. And I want to play with the blocks." She assured him that she would change him, and he could let her know when he needed it. She asked him if he wanted to do blocks now, and he said yes. I stayed for about ten minutes, then said it was time for me to leave. He said, "Bye, Mommy, see you." That was that. I was so proud of him! He worked it through, and then spoke up for himself as clearly as anyone can! That was the end of his problems at this day care.

--a mother in Oakland, CA

Holiday Meltdowns

They Go Together Like Peanut Butter and Jelly

By Patty Wipfler

It's one of the phenomena you can set your clock by. Your child will have big feelings when there is a special holiday or birthday coming up! We parents wish the universe ran by rules a little easier on us than this one. But this is the way things work with children. It may help to know that every other family deals with this same phenomenon, and that, in a way, children are built to have big feelings on big occasions.

Why? There are several reasons that work together. First, when any holiday or birthday rolls toward a family, it puts extra demands and stress on the parents. The children tend to become infected with stress too. They get less relaxed time with their parents, and have more expectations of "good behavior" put on them in stores, at homes they're not familiar with, and among people they may not know well. And second, children's hopes soar around holiday time. They look forward to the extra attention, to extra fun, to special times. When hopes are high, children feel disappointments much more acutely. A third factor is that when many people gather to care about each other, it creates enough safety to allow feelings to bubble up!

Children cry only when they can't function any longer

Children tend to do the very best they can to cooperate and to flex. Then, they hit "the wall." They can't go another moment without exploding in feelings. These meltdowns often happen in public places, when the family gathers, or at some other highly inconvenient time for you, the parent. Either a sibling will touch a sacred toy, or a spill of juice will bring a huge cry, or who sits next to whom at Thanksgiving will be the cause for a tantrum. It happens in *every* family, *every* holiday, because it must.

Children full of tension simply have to let it out. Their systems have a built-in "emotion ejection system" designed especially for the moments when they just can't think any longer. When they're done releasing the bad feelings, they can be reasonable, thoughtful, and flexible again!

Give up false hopes that tension will disappear

It helps immensely to be prepared. Just as you are in the habit of preparing yourself for the quirks in your relatives' behavior, you can prepare to handle your child's meltdown. When you see that things are getting tense, you can move *toward* the tension, instead of away from it. (You set yourself up for disappointment every time you think, "Maybe this time, he'll calm down all by himself.")

Move toward a child who's on the edge of upset

You can move *toward* a tense child to play with him for 5 or 10 minutes before leaving for Grandma's, eliciting as much laughter as you can (without tickling). This play will help him to feel more connected to you, and to regain his sense that life is good. Or you can gently but firmly set a limit if his behavior has already gone off-track. After you set the limit, stay with him and gently assist him to release the upset through crying or tantrums. Hold the limit and, at the same time, love the child.

Listening dissolves the upset

What children need is simple. They need the chance to have a good cry, express their disappointment, have the tantrum that's been brewing, or laugh a good while. When they're done, they can feel your love, notice the needs of the people around them, and show their genius for loving and living life well. Children's need to cry is as wholesome as their need for sleep—crying fully helps keeps their minds in good working order.

Children don't cry to embarrass or manipulate their parents. They cry to offload bad feelings so they can feel better again. When their meltdown happens in public, it often means that life has been going so fast in private that they couldn't find a way to refuel with your attention at home. So when they arrive at a public place, they are consumed with feelings. They want connection with you. That's all!

Think ahead to counter criticism from other adults

When others criticize your child for his or her outburst (which is, unfortunately, something you can also depend upon) you don't need to buy into that disapproval of you and your child. Think ahead of time about what you want to say. "Well, at least he's doing a good job of getting this out! We'll go into the back room so you don't all have to listen to it." Or, "She's been needing me to listen to her all day!" Or, "This will be over in a little while. Save some pie for us!"

Let go of unworkable expectations

We often hurtle into the holidays with very specific pictures in our minds of what the holiday is supposed to look like. Magazines, TV ads and dearly held family traditions tend to erode our power to decide what is workable for ourselves and our families. Parents lead their families. So, for instance, if the family has little money to spend on a holiday, the parents can set a tone of adventure, and let the children know what will be special about this holiday, and what to expect.

For instance, deciding that "We're going to give (or Santa will bring) one special gift for each person this year, and then we're all going to have four flavors of ice

cream--as much as we want--for breakfast!" or, "Each night of Hanukkah, we're going to light the candles, and then turn off the lights and get every pillow in the house together for a big pillow fight!" sets an expectation for new and memorable adventures that are affordable, and will be remembered for decades.

Find a listener to relieve your own stress

We parents need to remember that we need some time to laugh hard and cry, too, when we're hemmed in by holiday expectations we can't possibly meet. When you don't have a listener handy, it can work to play music that moves you, get time on the phone with a friend, or rent a movie that you know moves you to tears. Your mind will release the tensions that pinch, no matter what way you find to give yourself some meltdown time too.

We can help heal the effects of the mistakes we make

And what about the times when the holidays have driven you over the brink? Thanks to children's inborn healing process, the damage can be undone with an apology and some listening. Here is one holiday-stressed single mother's story.

I had just walked in the house with the kids and my son (he was seven) went right over to the Christmas tree and started "fixing" the lights. I had just put them on the tree. And he pulled them--well, he messed them up. And I got mad. I blew it, basically. I said, "What are you doing ! You wrecked it - I can't believe you did that!" I went on and on. (It's so awful when you make such big obvious mistakes!) Anyhow, he put his head in the sofa pillow and cried. So I went over to him. He kept turning away from me. I apologized. I said I'd made a mistake. I asked him if he wanted to fix the lights now and he wouldn't touch it. I told him I knew he was just trying to help (this usually brings more tears from him). He was crying.

He moved away from me. Previously, when he was upset and I moved close to him, he would fight me off wildly. So I decided to try what you had suggested and I didn't move toward him, but stayed on the sofa and kept talking to him. I kept asking him if he'd come sit in my lap. Then he cried harder--that invitation really did seem to get through to him. I guess it helps him notice how alone he feels, even though I love him. After a few minutes of crying, he came and jumped on my lap! I told him again that I was sorry. Then I said that moms make dumb mistakes sometimes, and that this one had been pretty dumb. He laughed, and we were feeling close again. We wrestled and played for a little while. Then I asked him if he wanted to fix the lights. He said yes, jumped up, and fixed the lights.

Offering love often brings intense feelings to the surface

When your child feels hurt and you talk to him with a tone of love and acceptance, it often speeds the healing process by helping the child cry more intensely. He gets the upset out of his system faster because he feels your love pouring in. The loving things you say won't look like they're helping--when you say just the right thing, your child will cry harder and act more hurt than ever. But keep offering your caring. As you reach for your child, he cries hard, and the two of you are partners in the process of closing the distance between you.

When children are upset, they want us close

In short, holidays intensify all of our hopes for closeness with each other. When children's feelings erupt, they're saying, "I can't feel loved or satisfied right now--please help!" The love we're working so hard to show them through family gatherings, gifts, and celebrations can seep directly into their hearts as we listen to them cry or tantrum about some detail of how life isn't right for them. They want us close while they tell us how bad it feels. Fixing the situation can almost always be done after the feelings are over, and your love has been delivered and received.

Helping Children to Share

By Patty Wipfler

When children want something, their feelings are often passionate. They can be gripped by a desire so strong that no other option will do. Every cell in their bodies is organized to communicate that having the *blue* shovel or the *green* balloon is the key to their happiness--a yellow shovel or a red balloon simply won't do! But as any parent who has tried to enforce sharing knows, taking turns at those moments is far easier said than done!

In this article, we'll look at why every child has at least some difficulties sharing, and we'll suggest a policy that you can establish that will move your child toward being able to share more of the time.

Children love to share

Children actually love to share. When they're babies, they like to give us things, and have us give those things back. When they're a bit older, they like to take the plate of crackers and offer one to each person in the room. When older still, they love the games that include everyone in the family. And when they are relaxed and feeling secure, children even love to see someone else enjoy their favorite things.

To be able to share, a child needs to feel a strong sense of connection-- he needs to feel loved and warmly accepted. When he feels close and emotionally safe, he's not so desperate for the blue shovel or the green balloon. He can wait for a turn. He has what he *really* needs--a sense of connection buoys him through little disappointments.

What children really want and need

Sharing goes hand in glove with being relaxed and feeling loved. Children have a few vital needs, and when these needs are filled, they can relax. They feel secure enough to play flexibly and respond thoughtfully to the needs and wishes of others. We all know that children need good food, good sleep, fresh air, room to play safely, and access to at least one or two people who are committed to their well-being. Parents, warmth, food, safety. These are the most basic needs.

But in order to relax and thrive, children need a few more vital things. Blue shovels and green balloons aren't on this list! My list of what a child needs to thrive goes something like this:

- The daily opportunity to connect and be relaxed with someone who cares,
- Emotional warmth and welcome,
- Respect for his intelligence,
- Time for play,
- Lots of affection,
- Frequent opportunities to laugh together with others,
- Frequent opportunity to cry in the shelter of someone's arms when hurt feelings arise,
- Information about what is happening and why, and
- Limits, enforced without harshness, that promote safety and respect.

Two main reasons sharing breaks down

When children aren't able to share, it's usually for one of two reasons. Either they haven't been able to establish a sense of connection in the past few hours, or something has happened to remind them of hurtful times in the past, when they felt afraid or alone.

When children don't feel connected, they can't share

Often, we parents don't notice how much time passes between moments when we can offer emotional warmth and connection. Life is full, and putting food on the table and a roof over one's head is increasingly difficult. We meet the external needs of our children--we dress them, give them food, see that they bathe and brush their teeth. But the time parents have to create playful, relaxed connections with their children dwindles every year as workplace demands grow and communities struggle to provide safe and decent places for children. For dual-career couples with children under 18, for example, the combined on-the-job hours have increased from an average of 81 a week in 1977 to 91 in 2002, according to the Work and Family Institute. And this does not take commuting hours into account! So it's no wonder that children have their "off track" behavior spells--they are bound to spin out of orbit, given the amount of other work we parents are expected to do.

To a child, a sense of connection is like a tightrope walker's long pole--feeling close to someone keeps a child in balance, so he can do challenging things with grace and confidence. Without that sense of connection, his ability to function lasts only a few seconds. Unhitched from a close bond, he feels too tense to share, too unsure of his own safety to take turns.

When a child becomes brittle, any little disappointment brings up lots of tears or tantrums about what he wants. The child aches to be brought close, but he focuses on needing a blue shovel or a green balloon to signal his parents that he needs help.

How children signal that they need connection

Once in awhile, children can ask directly for the closeness that will help them. They run to Daddy and cling to his leg, or they beg to sit in Mommy's lap. But children often use signals that are less direct. A child will let a parent know he's running on empty by wanting only what someone else has, or by wanting all of something--*all* of the blocks, *all* of the crackers, or *all* of the long park bench. And sometimes, children will suddenly want only something that is clearly off limits. If you are a parent with a child who tends to signal you in one of these ways, rest assured that there's nothing wrong with your child! He's communicating well. He's saying, "*I need your help!*"

Why children cry so easily about the small things they want

Once a child feels he can't live another minute without a desired item, the feelings run high. He has lost his sense of closeness and the safety that brings. He feels hurt, or even frightened. He tries to "fix" the feeling of hurt that comes when connection breaks by filling that sense of need with a blue shovel or a green balloon. But of course, blue shovels and green balloons don't meet the core needs of a child. He may cling to the item he wants, but it doesn't do his aching heart any good. When a child gets what he wants, he may look OK on the outside, but he may remain brittle on the inside--easily upset and either defensive or unhappily passive when someone else's turn comes.

Children cry easily at this point, because they need to. They often actually *set up* chances to cry about something they want, hoping their parents will know that they need to dissolve the hurt that comes from disconnection. **Crying, tantrums, and laughter are the main ways children recover their sense that all's right with the world.**

When an adult can set a helpful limit, and offer warmth and caring while feelings are high, a child can regain his sense of perspective. When he's done, he knows once again that life is OK with the yellow shovel, or that he'll eventually get some time with the green balloon.

It takes two to tangle

When two children want the same thing, and they're both feeling connected and relaxed, they share. They can figure out something fun to do while they wait for their turn. When they're toddlers, they don't even need to talk about the turns. One takes the toy, and the other thinks about it, and then moves on to some other

activity that pleases him. When children are older, they can figure out how to share verbally, and are pleased with themselves as they do it.

But when a child is tense, taking turns isn't his idea of a solution. He wants the blue shovel now! If a second child who wants the shovel is feeling connected, he can adjust his expectations and find something else to do for awhile. So problems with sharing arise primarily when both children are feeling rocky because they have lost their sense of connection.

The limitations of adult-enforced solutions

When children can't share, we parents want to fix the problem quickly! But fixing it--saying whose turn it is, and timing the turns so they're fair, for instance--turns us into enforcers rather than connectors. Our children's "need" for the blue shovel may be met, 5 minutes at a time, but his deeper need to feel close to someone still throbs. So he can't share without help, and he continues to need help, incident after incident.

When adults insist on turns and a child's turn finally comes, that child often defends his hard-won item with all his energy. He loses the joy of having it, and the benefit of learning during his play with it, in the effort to defend his turn. Or he may gloat that he has it, upsetting the children around him.

Perhaps another, more subtle difficulty with adult-enforced sharing is that while we're sorting out a dispute, it's easy to slip into feeling like our children are immature, because sharing is simple. But sharing isn't easy for grownups either! The reality of the human condition is that a parent might try to negotiate turns between the children one minute, and return to the kitchen to continue a longstanding disagreement with a partner over sharing the tasks of the household or who decides what the family will do on Sunday.

I think the most compelling reason not to habitually enforce turns is that it focuses our attention on trying to make things "the same" for each child, rather than on *connecting* with each child. When children don't feel connected to you or to each other, their disputes will continue, and run your patience into the ground. They feel needy. No amount of enforcement will help them relax and work things out with tolerance and good will.

It can be smart to set up and patrol turns when you're in a public place and tantrums will embarrass you greatly, when you're on the edge of exhaustion and can't listen to anyone's feelings, or when you're working with a large group of children, and paying attention to one will leave the others unsafe.

But on good days, we adults can actually help children undo the upsets that make sharing an ongoing challenge. A long-range policy that helps children relax enough to share well and often is this:

"I'll be with you while you wait."

When your child wants something he can't have, and you come close and listen to his tears or tantrum, you meet his core need to get rid of deep feelings. When you can manage to offer connection and company for him during his upset, he may feel angry with you for not "solving" the problem, but he'll feel quite loving toward you when he's finished shedding those feelings. Crying, trembling, and having tantrums are children's way of dissolving the power of an upset, so they can regain their ability to see that there are many options that would satisfy them. When we stay and love them until the storm is over, they have the strongest possible sense of security: "My Dad loves me no matter what," "My Mommy loved me, even when I told her to go away!"

Over time, in any family or group of children that adopts this policy, every child will have the chance to cry hard with a loving adult about his wants and feelings of need. Shana gets the dolly stroller for a long turn today while Anita cries about wanting it. Tomorrow, Anita gets the stroller while Jordan has a tantrum because he wants it. Shana had a good cry two days ago, so she's relaxed enough to want it, see that Anita has it now, and move on to play under the table instead. Each child gets your arm around them while they cry, and hears your reassuring words, "Anita will be through with it sometime. I'll stay with you while you wait."

Set a goal of long-term fairness

With this policy, you don't have to spend your energy trying to make things the same for each child in the short run. A child who wants to ride the only tricycle in the yard may get a whole 20 minutes while her friend cries hard about wanting it. But the child who cries gets a caring adult's warm attention, a far more significant prize than the tricycle. And the child who has the trike doesn't have to defend her toy--she can play without fear that something will be arbitrarily taken. She also has the opportunity to offer a turn out of real generosity, rather than being forced to be nice because an adult says so.

Sometimes, a child clings tightly to a toy or other desired item for days at a time, never letting others have a turn. In this case, you need to be proactive about the "I'll be with you while you wait" policy. You let the child know that tomorrow will be different: "Sam, tomorrow when Maggie comes to play, she's going to get to ride the trike first, and I'll help you wait." You know that when Maggie gets there, Sam will make a bee-line for the trike! So, prepare. You know what's going to happen. Get there first, saying, "Sam, today Maggie gets the first turn. Let's move back a step so she can climb on." Sam then gets to have the cry and the personal attention he's been signaling for.

Outcomes you can expect over time

This policy puts lots of trust in the good nature of children. It is based on the reliable, healing power of tantrums and of crying hard.

When a child is listened to well while he cries long and hard about the turn he's not getting, several outcomes are often seen. It can happen that the other child comes and willingly offers a turn, having thought about her crying friend and found empathy in her heart. It can also happen that a child cries long and hard, and then decides there's something else he wants to do. Usually, if his cry hasn't been cut short, he'll be relaxed, confident, and undaunted by not getting the item he wanted. Its importance fades as the feel of your love seeps in.

Over time, children whose feelings are listened to become much better able to make friends and navigate the intricacies of sharing. They become less defensive, less aggressive. They laugh more and fight less. This transformation happens gradually, over time, but if you are listening to a child's feelings, you can depend on good results.

An adult who will stay close, hold a reasonable limit and listen to a child's feelings can fill the core needs of the child. You don't have to rummage through the garage for a second blue shovel or try to find a green balloon just like the one that Sally has. You simply need to listen while your child cries about what he wants but can't have, until he can tell he's OK and you love him.

Here's how "I'll be with you while you wait" works

I held a small parent/child playtime for parents of children who were under three. One little girl I'll call Anna was brought by her two parents, who also had her baby brother in their arms.

During the Special Time portion of the playtime, Anna's father began paying full attention to her. She immediately began running around the play space loudly chanting "Baby! Baby! Baby! Baby!" over and over again. It was easy to conclude that she was announcing the issue that was most on her mind.

After Special Time, another girl, whom Anna had totally ignored, happened to be playing with a red ball. It was one of three balls that were identical, except for their colors. Anna went over and whined that she wanted the red ball. I told her gently that she could have it when the child was finished with it, and I said she could play with the two other balls available. She took in my answer, and then began to scream.

Her father came over and held her while she curled into a ball in his arms, screamed at the top of her lungs, and cried. She went back and forth from kicking and screaming to sobbing and burrowing into him. I stayed close, to support him. Together, we listened to her feelings, and now and then we told her she could have a ball, but not the one Ginger was playing with. She cried hard for about 20 minutes. Then, she looked out and saw that Ginger had finished with the red ball, and was playing with some cardboard blocks.

Anna wiped her eyes, and, finally free of that load of feelings, went over and gently, thoughtfully entered into play with Ginger. The child she had totally ignored was now a possible friend. The red ball was of no interest to either of them. They spent the next half hour playing in very close proximity, sharing easily and laughing again and again, as though they had known one another for a long time. Not once did Anna show possessiveness over sharing space or sharing toys. She had had her good cry, she had gotten her father's listening and attention, and her needs had been met. With her improved confidence, she made a friend.



Listening To What Children Want It's a Big Part of Parenting

By Patty Wipfler

A big part of our experience as parents has to do with developing ways to address the deeply felt wants and needs of our children. We deal with wants and needs from our babies' earliest moments through their entry into young adulthood. We have to figure out what our children's real needs are, and what to do when they want things they don't need, or can't have. And we have to deal with our own feelings of sadness, frustration, or anger about how much they need and want. We are dedicated to making life as good as possible for them, but sooner or later we find it hard to be generous when our own needs for rest, reassurance, and resource aren't well met.

Whole books are written about the developmental needs of young children, so this little article won't try to point out the difference between needs and wants at a particular age or stage. Suffice it to say here that children need *lots* of undivided, warm attention from their parents and others around them. They need to be treated with respect. They need play, lots of room to experiment, and lots of positive response to who they are and what interesting experiments they do. They need information about what's going on around them, from the very beginning--their minds work beautifully, and from early infancy onward, they understand far more language and emotional context than we realize. Even when we meet their needs well, there are moments every single day when our children long for attention or for things we can't give them. When Mommy and Daddy can handle these moments of intense longing gently and with understanding, it makes a huge difference in a child's life.

Feelings of need sometimes persist after the needy moment has passed

Children acquire **feelings of need**--for attention, for food, for physical closeness, for reassurance that everything is all right--during moments when they are frightened or sad. These moments occur in every child's life, no matter how attentive the parents may be. An example of such a moment might be a baby who is feeling pain from teething, and is hungry. He takes the breast or bottle, only to find that it hurts, so the parents' efforts to help him can't rectify the entire situation. He nurses and cries, nurses and cries, and the parents feel sad or frustrated, wishing they had a magic answer.

Sometimes children experience a big need that isn't filled--the need to feel safe and close and cherished in the days right after birth, for example. When a baby has to be medically treated or separated from his parents for other reasons, he has feelings of need and often fear that aren't addressed by the not-so-personal care of the hospital staff. When baby finally gets back to his parents arms, his present needs are being met at last, but the feelings of need from that earlier,

scary time may linger and make him jumpy, unable to sleep well, or given to long crying spells for no apparent reason.

Sometimes a child acquires a collection of feelings from incidents we adults consider uneventful, such as Daddy going to work in the morning, or Mommy abruptly turning away to answer the phone or help with an older children's homework. In any case, these big and little experiences of need leave packets of feelings that a child then carries along with him until he can heal from the hurt, large or small.

"I need my Mommy" or "I want attention" or "I'm afraid to be more than an arm's length away from my Daddy when he's home" feelings can keep a child from exploring confidently, from making friends, and from noticing that he's safe with trusted relatives or caregivers. Sometimes such feelings hinder a child only under certain circumstances--when he's tired, or when lots of people are around, or when the parents are affectionate with each other. Sometimes such feelings operate most of the time, making it seem like the child is "shy" or "timid" or "selfish." The "feelings of need" signals can become so persistent that they govern the child's personality.

Children try to shed these leftover feelings

Somewhere deep inside themselves, children know that these feelings need to be addressed. It is not yet commonly understood that children will instinctively set up situations in which it's impossible for you to meet their stated "needs." **They do this so that they can feel the need fully, show you how they hurt, cry or tantrum about it, and thus eliminate the hold the feeling has on them.** Then they can function more logically and boldly, and feel much better about themselves. This is why your toddler may throw down a toy from his high chair, whine to get it back, and when you give it back, look unhappy and throw it down again. He's trying to "work on" his feelings of need, and to do it, he needs you not to fix the situation!

For instance, one three-year-old girl I know was being weaned from her bottle, to which she was very attached. Her Mom knew that holding her and loving her well while she cried about wanting her bottle (and *not* wanting the cup of milk her mother offered) was a good way to help her daughter work through this attachment. After several long cries about desperately needing her bottle, the child was spending more time playing without her bottle hanging from her mouth, and her general confidence was growing. One day, she gave her Mommy her bottle, and asked her to put it high up on a shelf across the room. Mystified, her Mom did what she asked, and returned to her daughter, who climbed into her mother's lap and began to cry heartily about wanting her bottle. She had set up her own time to cry about wanting her bottle!

Often, children will squabble over who gets a desired toy, or who gets to sit on Daddy's lap, or who got the most ice cream in their bowl. These squabbles can expose deep feelings of need, all wrapped around issues that are not, in the big picture, vital to the child. If a child is trying to work through his feelings of need, you will notice that although you try to fix things to make them "fair" or "equal," your child can't relax and enjoy the improved situation. He becomes defensive, runs away with the toy or hoards it, or remains otherwise isolated or unhappy although the situation seems to be "fixed." The feelings of need are still operating strongly, and they will continue to make your child unreasonable.

Your attention is a powerful balm

To address these feelings of need, a good long-range policy for squabbles is to move in and offer love and attention to the child whose turn it isn't, or who can't have what or who he wants. Move in and make gentle contact. Let him know that this time, he needs to wait, or that he simply can't have what he longs for right now. Stay, listen to his feelings, and keep letting him know that he will get a turn, or that some other day, he can sit in the chair next to Daddy, or have more ice cream. "I'll help you wait" is a good reassurance to give, or "Sally will be finished with it sometime. I don't know when. But I'll help you wait." A child can use wanting a turn or wanting more of something as a valve to let out lots of stored, outdated longings that keep him from feeling fully pleased with you and with life. You can give warm eye contact and loving touch, knowing that you and your love are pouring into some needy places in his experience. His feelings will be strong. In fact, the sweeter you sound, the bigger his cry will become. The healing process is full-throated when it's going well!

When children are feeling needy, *you* are the balm that they need. Your attention is by far the most powerful remedy, and if they can cry or tantrum with your attention surrounding them, you can be sure that they are getting what they need most in the world. (When you can't be there, and it's you they are longing for, any adult who can listen and love them while they cry will soon be seen as their very best friend and confidant. Listening and love are what we need when we're aching for someone or something. It's great to get the person or thing you want, but when that's not possible, it's great to have someone who opens their arms to you, listens, and lets grief do its healing work.)

With the "I'll help you wait, and listen to your feelings" policy, every child in the family (or in the play group or nursery school) will have a chance to be helped with their leftover feelings of wanting as time goes by. Every child will have the chance to dissolve some big "frozen needs," that create defensiveness or aggression. Several good cries with a loving adult can help each child move toward playing flexibly and showing generosity to other children.

It's not easy to listen to children's longings

When you begin allowing your child a good cry or tantrum, you'll have lots of feelings of your own to cope with too. We parents tend to swing back and forth between feeling sad that our child doesn't have what he wants, and mad that we have to listen to such a fuss. (We can also become deeply miffed by other children who, because *their* feelings of wanting have infected their behavior, hog the toy our child wants for what seems like ages!) Our feelings are important too. They lead us to emotional debris from situations we faced many times as children, usually without someone to hold us and reassure us that all would be well. We need chances to talk about our own experiences as parents, and our memories of childhood, to begin to heal the tensions that build up when our children, or other people's children, are feeling heartbroken.

Listening to longings is a much-needed skill

Our world will become a very different place when we parents have spread the word about staying close and affectionate while our children cry and tantrum when they can't get what they want. The empty and frightened spots inside them will have a chance to heal. We are citizens of a world full of people whose feelings of desperation need to be heard and healed, while justice is built. Offering love and listening to children while they wait for what they want is an important step in an excellent direction.

Here's how it works

Here's a story that illustrates how helping a child work on wanting (and not wanting) can help her dissolve feelings about the bigger difficulties of her life.

"My daughter is 3, and she's going to pre-school now. My husband and I have recently separated. Ella loves school. She talks about it enthusiastically when she's at home, and she likes being there, but has a very difficult time when I leave her there. She wraps herself around me, clings tightly, and won't let me get out the door. This has been going on for awhile."

"Yesterday, after we got home from school, she was feisty and cranky. I was fixing her a snack, and I could tell that bad feelings were close to the surface. The last straw for her was that the chair I had set out for her was in the "wrong" place. I knew that this was an opportunity to help her with how she felt, so I didn't fix it. She ran across the room, upset about the chair. I went over to sit next to her. She was trying to cry, but wasn't crying yet--it was a kind of "fake" crying. I sat with her, and told her as gently as I could, "That chair is just in the wrong place," trying to help her feel her upset fully. She said, "I don't need you!" and ran away from me. I moved to about 4 feet away from her again, and said, "I'm going to stay nearby, I don't want to leave you right now." She kept moving away from me, across the room or into another room,

and I kept moving near her again. Each time she became more upset and getting closer to a real cry. Finally, as I moved in towards her she didn't run away. Instead she lay on the floor kicking and repeating, "I don't need you!" Then, I said, "I'm sorry I can't stay with you in the morning at school, but I just can't." She began to cry hard. I asked, "Does it make you mad?" She nodded no. I asked, "Does it make you sad?" She nodded no, then she nodded yes, and began to cry really hard. I told her again that I was sorry I couldn't stay with her in the mornings at school. She kept crying hard, and began to say, "I want Mommy! I want Mommy!" She was sobbing, and she came and curled into my arms and cried hard for awhile. It was lovely to hold her and help her with these feelings. At some point, she just stopped, as though we'd been having a conversation and the subject had changed. That was all."

"The next morning, when it was time for me to leave her at school, she ran up to me, gave me a big hug and a kiss, and said, "Bye, Mommy!" and then ran off to play. What a change! I have to tell you that the morning after that, she was feeling things again, and clung to me--I think because our life has been unsettled at home, she isn't finished with this yet. But it was great to see what a good cry could do for her."--- a mother in San Francisco



Why Not Tickle My Child?

By Patty Wipfler

Tickling is one of those customary kinds of play that is handed down from generation to generation through our families. It is rarely questioned, but deserves to be thought about more carefully, as it's a form of play that can, despite good intentions, hurt a child. To put tickling in a broader framework, it's one of the ways to play that puts people in touch with each other. It also is a dependable way to get lots of laughter rolling. So tickling looks, on the surface, like a kind of play that children enjoy, and that is good for them. And indeed, some children ask their parents for tickling games. We are glad to be asked--it feels great to have an instant way to laugh and be playful together.

But in my many years of listening to adults talk about the emotional challenges of their lives as children, tickling comes up again and again as an experience that has been hurtful. I've listened to a large number of adults who can't relax when others are in close proximity to them. They can't sleep close to a trusted partner, for instance, or are internally on guard any time there's more than casual touching between them and someone they love. When asked what they are afraid of, their memories go straight to times when they were tickled as children, and couldn't get the tickler to stop.

The foundations of healthy play

I don't think that most tickling in families is pursued to the level of abuse, but I do think that tickling can be replaced with healthier options. In healthy play, these ground rules are usually operating. These guidelines insure the fun. They make play an intelligence-promoting activity.

- Each child is respected.
- Each child has a way to succeed.
- Each child's contributions are acknowledged.
- Each child knows he/she is safe from criticism and belittlement.
- Each child can say what he/she thinks and wants. His/her ideas may not be workable, and limits may need to be set, but the thoughts are welcome as a worthy contribution.
- No child is coerced into a powerless or subservient role in the guise of play.
- An adult is present or nearby, to insure that the play stays safe and inclusive.
- To promote laughter, the adults in the situation play the less powerful role, leaving the role of "the swift, the strong, the smart and the informed" to the children.

Where tickling falls short

The main thing that makes tickling problematic is that **children may not be able to say when they want it to stop**. Laughter is virtually an automatic response to being touched by a tickler--it's not a response that the child can opt out of. This puts the tickler in charge of how much or how long the child laughs. Most of us remember unpleasant or frightening times when we wanted a tickler to stop, but were laughing so hard we couldn't say it, or worse, we said, "Stop!" or tried to escape, and the tickler continued. We adults don't read children's minds (but we often imagine that we can). So we usually *think* we're aware of what's too much tickling and when to stop, but it is possible to trap our children without knowing it.

We want to play and be close

Parents and children crave times together when there's lots of free-flowing laughter and playful contact. It's *so* good for us to play, *so* good for us to be in touch with each other. We parents become attached to tickling. We long to know that our children are happy and love us, and tickling becomes our shortcut to this reassurance.

Rather than forcing laughter in this way, we can build our children's confidence if we will get down on the floor and invite them to be in playful physical contact with us. If we find ways to give them much of the power, our children will laugh and laugh. Games like "I have a hundred hugs for you!" or "Where's Jared? I know he's around here somewhere," or "Oh, no! I can't get this horsy rider off my back!" let children laugh and laugh as we try to catch them, or try to find them, or try to bounce them off our backs, and fail over and over. It requires more creativity than tickling, but allows us to tumble around, to burrow our heads in their tummies for a second here and there, and to manage a cuddle before they make another daring escape. We get our affection across without trapping our children. And we give them a chance to be inventive as they figure out a hundred ways to outsmart us.

“But my child asks to be tickled!”

When tickling has been one of the main options for being playfully close in a family, children will ask for it. Their need to be close and to feel your enjoyment beaming toward them is stronger than their fear of being trapped by tickling. So they want it. When his Mom began to play without tickling him, one four-year-old I know told her, "I didn't really like it very much, but it was the only way you would play with me!" One way to transition from tickling to tussling and playful contact that allows the child to be in charge is to *pretend* to tickle when tickling is requested. Wiggle your fingers close to your child's tummy or sides, and show your usual playful delight, but keep your hands an inch or two away from her body, letting her laugh and laugh without taking the risk of trapping her. If your child tickles you in return, you can playfully writhe and try to get away--she's making you the victim in a role-

reversal that lets her offload any tension she may feel about tickling. It's not fair, but she gets to *really* tickle, and you don't!

**Other kinds of playful physical contact are great,
if you offer your child the initiative**

Our children do need us to be affectionate with them, and to be playfully persistent with our affection at times. It's one way to communicate that we're in love with them. Blowing raspberries on your child's tummy, nuzzling into her armpit, giving bucking bronco rides and nibbling fingers or toes are all affectionate moves that might bring a ticklish reaction. These kinds of play are fine as long as you let the play "breathe" after each affectionate move. You kiss your child's toes, and then let go and see what response he has. If he gets up and runs away, you can lumber after him on hands and knees, trying for a long time before you finally kiss a toe again, with lots of laughter in the chase. Or you bury your head in her tummy, then pull back and grin as she decides what she wants to do. If she laughs and lies there, waiting, you can try it again. Children love us to come close, to play games and to be playful. We just need to keep giving them chances to guide the play, so we don't become overbearing.

Thoughtfulness about play with our children doesn't mean being extremely careful. It does mean putting in just a few guidelines that help us to balance the power between our children and ourselves while play proceeds. When we phase out tickling, we're able to phase in play that our children will invent, play that works better to expand their sense that we love and support them.

Handling Children's Feelings in Public Places

By Patty Wipfler

We live in a society that has a demanding and judgmental attitude toward parents and young children. Often, the attitude toward children in public is that they should be seen and not heard, that the parent should be in control of the child's behavior, and that children who become upset in public are a nuisance. In short, children are not really welcome. Their freshness, curiosity, and frank expressions of feelings are not welcome.

In addition, the childrearing tradition that has been handed down to most of us sets us against our children when their behavior isn't convenient for adults. Others expect us to criticize, use harsh words, punish, isolate, shame, threaten, or physically attack a child who is "misbehaving." No parent really wants to act aggressively toward the child he loves. We treat our beloved children in these ways when we can't think of anything else to do, or when we fear the disapproval of others.

You can learn to predict your child's emotional moments

There are certain situations in which young children often become emotionally charged. These situations include:

- **Being with several people:** with the whole family at dinner, at a family gathering, a meeting, a birthday party, the grocery store, church, or temple.
- **Moving from one activity to another:** leaving home for day care, leaving day care for home, stopping play for dinner, going to bed.
- **Being with a parent who is under stress:** the parent is cooking, cleaning, shopping, trying to finish a task on time, and is upset because there's so little help.
- **At the end of any especially close or fun-filled time:** after a trip to the park, after a good friend leaves, after wrestling, chasing and laughing with Mom or Dad.

When children become emotionally charged, they can't think. They simply can't function normally. They become rigid and unreasonable about what they want. Nothing satisfies them. They can't listen, and the slightest thing brings them to tears or tantrums. Their minds are full of upset. They can't get out of that state without your help.

At times like this, your child needs you to **set kind, sensible limits. Then he needs you to listen while he bursts out with the intense feelings he has.** This spilling of feelings, together with your kind attention and patience, is the most effective way to speed your child's return to his sensible, loving self. A good, vigorous tantrum or a hearty, deeply felt cry will clear your child's mind of the emotion that was driving him "off track" and will help him to relax again and make the best of the situation he is in.

“Do I have to listen to a screaming, flailing child in the middle of the supermarket?”

Several adjustments of our expectations are necessary before we can let ourselves be on our children’s side as they do what they need to do in a public place.

- We need to remember that *every good child falls apart often in public places*. This is, for some reason, the way children are built!
- We need to remember *that our society has trained people to disapprove of children doing what is healthy and natural*. People disapprove of horseplay, of noise, of exuberance, of too much laughter, of tantrums, of crying, of children asking for the attention they need. This disapproval is out of line. Children are good. Their needs are important, including the need to offload bad feelings.
- *We need to decide that, as parents, it’s our job to treat our child well*. When other adults criticize him, it makes sense to do what we can to be on our child’s side. If a child doesn’t have his parent to protect him from harm, who will?
- *We need to realize that being parents means that we will have to advocate for our children* in many settings: with doctors and nurses, with teachers, with relatives, and with strangers.
- Finally, we need to acknowledge that *children legitimately need far more attention than it is comfortable to give*. Adults who give less attention to their own children, or who got little attention themselves as children, will be upset when they see you giving your undivided attention to your upset child. We can expect these upsets, but we don’t have to be governed by them.

“OK, but what do I do when my child falls apart in the supermarket aisle, or at his grandparents’ house?”

- **Spend one-on-one time with your child *before* you take him to a public place**, so that you and he are connected with each other before heading into a challenging situation. Then, stay connected. Use eye contact, touch, your voice, and short spurts of attention to keep him in the orbit of your love. This contact is deeply reassuring, and can sometimes defuse situations that your child often finds difficult.
- **When you see an upset brewing, make contact right away**. See if you can find a way to play, so that your child can laugh. Laughter relieves children’s tensions, and allows them to feel more and more connected. If, when you make contact, your child begins to cry or tantrum, do what you can to allow him to continue. His upset will heal if the feelings are allowed to drain.

- **Slow down the action, and listen.** If getting into the car seat has triggered tears, then stay there, seat belt not yet done, and let the tears flow. Listen until he is done. Because of this cry, your whole day, and his, will improve.
- **If necessary, move to a more socially acceptable place.** Go to the back bedroom, or move your grocery cart out the exit to the sidewalk. Do this as calmly as you can. Your child isn't doing anything wrong. It's sort of like a car alarm going off accidentally—loud, but not harmful to anyone. These things happen!
- **Plan what you will say to people who express their opinions or concern.** It's hard to come up with a comment that says, "We're OK—don't worry!" in the middle of wild things happening, so think ahead. You can adopt some phrase like, "We seem to be having technical difficulties," or, "My daughter really knows how to wail!" or, "It's that kind of a day!" or, "After he's finished, it's my turn!" or simply, "We're OK. I don't think this will last all day." A comment like this reassures others, and gives the message that you are in charge.

As one parent I know put it, "I've finally figured out that it's *my* job to set a limit when he's going "nuts," and it's *his* job to get the bad feelings out. As I listen to him, people might not be able to tell that I'm doing my job and he's doing his, but at least *I* know that's what's going on."

Here's how it can work

Our family was invited to a holiday party at the home of some friends. I got dressed nicely, dressed our three girls nicely, and was really looking forward to having them play with the other children there, whom they knew, so I could talk with my friends. We get so little adult-to-adult time!

When my middle daughter got there, she clung to me and didn't want me to talk with adults. She wanted me to play with her. She whined. She wheedled. I tried to show her what the children were doing, and to entice her to leave my side, but she was having none of it!

So I said, "OK, I'm going to give you 5 minutes of Special Time. I'll do whatever you want, play whatever you want, and then I'm going to go and visit with my friends." She wanted us to get underneath the dining room table and play there, so I did it. She happily made a nest there, turned us into animals, and had me to herself. When 5 minutes was over, I gave her a hug, and, surprise of all surprises, she crawled out from under the tablecloth and ran off to be with the other children. It doesn't always happen that way for her, but I was so pleased with her, and with myself, that night. I felt like a genius! And like a really good mom.

--a mother in Sunnyvale, CA