



Hand in Hand

555 Waverley St., #25
Palo Alto, California 94301
650 322 5323

www.handinhandparenting.org

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Listening to Children
Crying



by Patty Wipfler



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When Your Child Begins to Cry

In listening to parents over the years, I have learned a simple truth: parents want good lives for their children. We want our young ones to be happy, loved, respected and understood. We also want the chance to correct the mistakes our parents made with us. For most of us, these goals are far more difficult to achieve than we had imagined. We discover that loving and nourishing a child is complex work that challenges the hardiest grownup. Help is scarce as we juggle too much work, too little time, and the constant call of our children to "Come and play, Daddy!" and "Watch this, Mommy!"

It's no wonder, then, we become troubled when our children start to cry. To us, their crying often feels like parental failure. The scene is familiar: we are shuffling through the day in reasonably good spirits, balancing the children's needs, our needs and that long mental list of things to be done. One of the children wants a cracker. When the box turns up empty he begins to cry. At this moment, our insides curdle. We become annoyed, worried, tired, exasperated. We try to stop him from crying. Our tactics might be to soothe him, to try to talk him into a cracker substitute, to point out his mistake in wanting crackers before dinner, or to scold him when he doesn't stop crying over something so silly. We want the crying to stop so the hurt will go away.

If we watch closely, though, we may notice that the hurt doesn't always go away when the crying stops. A child may quiet down, but often he'll still feel upset. He will droop and refuse to look at anyone. Or he might become angry toward the people he loves. An incident that begins with tears about a small thing, perhaps a broken truck or a torn homework paper, can turn into a long period of frustration and upset. The child can't seem to come around and trust other people again. He isn't satisfied, his parents are peeved and family life doesn't flow smoothly.

A simple but significant change in what we do when our children begin to cry can bring relief straight to the core of their tensions. If we listen and stay close, without interrupting his tears, a child will cry until his upset resolves. Here is the headline: **Crying Heals the Hurt**. And because you have let your child be in charge of shedding his hurt feelings, he will come away stronger and surer of himself. Listening is a powerful tool that can transform children's upsets into opportunities for them to gain confidence. Listening lets you work *with* your child. He does the work of eliminating his bad feelings and you stay close, offering the support he needs to emerge full of trust and hope when he's finished. We get to play a powerful, healing role when we stop and listen to a child who begins to cry.

Crying Is a Natural Recovery Process

One way to understand our children's need to cry is to picture them perched on a narrow balance beam of confidence. On this beam, their sunny optimism allows them to learn quickly and to trust us when we offer suggestions or help. They feel secure and loved, and they experiment constantly. When their experiments don't work they simply try again. (Remember how many falls your toddler took as he learned to walk?) But this precious sense of confidence and closeness is easily disrupted. When their best efforts fail too often, or when the people around them seem remote or disapproving, children's feelings are hurt and they fall from this narrow beam on which the world feels safe and good. Thrown off track, our children can't find the confidence they need to keep trying. They feel sad, and begin to cry.

The approach of listening to a child at times like these is based on the insight that crying is part of a recovery process. Your child cries in order to shed his hurt feelings. As you stay with him, he gathers a sense of being supported and cared about at the very same time that he feels his worst. From his point of view, his life is falling apart, and there you are by his side, riding out the storm with him. Once your child has expelled his sad feelings by crying, he returns to his life refreshed. His confidence, hope and intelligence shift into gear, allowing him to learn and love well again. When you

listen as your child cries, you enable him to learn as he faces tough challenges and to recover from the incidents that hurt him.

Small Incidents Give Rise to Big Feelings

This recovery process—crying until the hurt is gone—comes naturally to our children. They try to use it whenever they are having trouble feeling loved and confident. When a child lacks the confidence to make it through the next half hour, he'll usually choose a very small issue as the focus of his upset. For instance, after being excluded from play by his sister all afternoon, your younger child asks for a piece of toast. You serve him one and he bursts into sobs. You cut it into triangles: he wanted rectangles! If you simply kneel down, put your arm around him and listen, the crying can go on for a long time. The triangular toast feels tragic to him: it's the last straw, after hearing, "I don't want you around! Go away!" all afternoon. Your child is not petty or manipulative. This is the way all children (not just infants and toddlers) ask for help at the low moments in their lives. We adults are not that different. Often, for instance, when we feel most alone, we don't begin to cry about it until we stub our toe on the door jamb, or until the toilet overflows. These are the kinds of little incidents that open the door to far bigger feelings.

The little issues that allow your child to cry can irritate you greatly unless you remember that they often stand for bigger issues. There will be times, at the end of a long cry about a piece of toast cut the wrong way or a broken cookie, when your child will be able to tell you what the real issue was: "Mommy, I saw a show on TV when you were out, and in it the Mother got sick and died," or "Daddy, I want you to love me as much as you love Rachel." Other times, your child will cry, then finish and romp off to play without saying anything. We parents desperately want to know what causes our children such grief, but there are times when they have no words for how they feel. Fortunately, it is enough that we listen. With us by their sides, they can get the important recovery work done, even when we don't understand exactly what that work is.

Happy Times Often Bring Up Unfinished Grief

As if to make parenting even more of a test of character, children often choose happy, close times with you to bring up feelings of upset. I call this the “spoiled outing” phenomenon. You have just spent a happy day with your children, perhaps at the park or with their cousins, playing and doing the things they love. As you head for home, your children become unhappy and easily upset. They cry about having to sit in the back seat, over your request that each child carry his own jacket, or because you’ve stopped at McDonalds, not Burger King. A parent’s mood at moments like these tends to be grim. “If this is how you act, I’m not bringing you to the park again!”

What the children are actually doing is taking advantage of the extra feelings of safety and closeness they have gathered throughout the day. The backdrop of a day’s satisfaction makes the imperfections in life stand out, like spaghetti stains on a white tablecloth. Because he’s had such a happy day, your child now turns to address the sadness he still carries. For your child, it’s an efficient way to flush out stored upsets. If you don’t expect it, however, a spoiled outing can be frustrating or even infuriating. Once you realize that it happens like clockwork, you are in a much better position to listen as your child cries his upsets into peace of mind. For instance, you can begin to head for home before all your energy is spent, knowing that along the way, there will be some constructive falling apart to be done.

Guidelines for the Listener

The following are basic steps to take as your child makes use of this deeply effective recovery process.

- **Remedy any physically harmful situation, and remove any real danger from the scene.**

This means pulling pinched fingers out of toys, lifting your child’s fallen bike off his leg, or holding off siblings or playmates

who might be upset enough to hurt him. Do the sensible thing, as calmly as you can.

- **Keep your own upset and advice to yourself.**

Your child is looking for your support now that you have arrived and are listening. Adding your own upset or advice will only complicate his efforts to understand what has happened to him. For instance, if your child fell while running, simply listen and hold him. You'll be tempted to scold him or lecture him about the wet pavement. Don't give in to this impulse. As he cries, your child blocks most of his surroundings out of his mind, focusing entirely on how he feels and on your reassuring presence. He has narrowed his focus to do the work of recovery. He can't complete this task without concentrating on it fully. Don't distract him with a lecture on how he could have done things better. While he is crying, he can't process the advice you give, and any anger you might express only adds to his hurt.

After he has cried fully and is feeling safe and sure of himself again, he'll be eager to learn from what happened with just a touch of help from you. "See where you slipped? It's wet there." is all you'll need to say. Because his crying has cleared away the confusion he felt, he can respond proudly, "Oh, I slipped on the wet part. I'm going to run slow where it's wet, Daddy. Watch me!"

- **Move close to your child, and offer him gentle touch and eye contact.**

Touch and loving eye contact are two of the most powerful reassurances we can give. Hold your child or offer him your gentle touch, and position yourself so that he can see you if he chooses. Don't put him over your shoulder to cry, or let him stay buried in your lap for long. Your gentle encouragement to take a look at you will remind your child of your love. As you offer your loving gaze he will most likely cry harder, because he feels how much you care. However, he may not be able to look at you at all. Don't worry. It simply means that he is concentrating on

sad feelings and isn't finished working them through. After more crying and your patient encouragement to connect, he will be able to relax and make full contact with you again.

When your child is in tears all his defenses are down. As he focuses on his sadness, your response makes a deep impression. Your tender touch, your caress on his cheek, the way you cradle him in your arms, a gentle kiss now and then on his fingers brings your caring straight to your child's heart. Few words from you are needed. Your child will probably not acknowledge your affection, but when you see how fully he relaxes afterwards you'll know that he absorbed every bit of your love.

- **Gently invite him to tell you what the trouble is.**
Do not insist on any particular response.

Children who have begun to cry always have a reason, a good reason, for their feelings. The deeper the feelings, the harder it is for the child to talk about them. Tell him that you want to understand what happened, then simply accept whatever he can show you. At times, the mere thought of talking about troubles will keep a child's tears flowing long before any words can be spoken. You will not be totally in the dark about how he feels, however. The tone of his cry, the look on his face, how he looks at you (or shuts his eyes tight) can tell you a great deal about this upset. Stay keenly tuned to him, whether he can talk about his troubles or not.

One child I know often had a hard time when one of her parents was gone on a business trip. Once, when her father was out of town, two-year-old Amy was especially upset when her mother left her at day care. In the evening, her caregiver reported that she had been sad, withdrawn and touchy most of the day. That night when Amy and her mother got home, Amy was dissatisfied with everything her mother did. The mother went to Amy, put her arms around her, and said, "Let's talk about what's so hard." Amy cried and screamed for a long time in her mother's arms. She said nothing, but was obviously working through a great upset.

Her mother, guessing that she was missing her father, periodically reassured her that her dad was coming back.

When Amy stopped crying she didn't seem quite at peace, so her mother asked, "Amy, what is it that has you so worried?" Amy, who had said nothing during her long cry, looked at her mother and said emphatically, "The kitten we gave to Grandma had a mother, but its mother isn't coming back!" Two weeks before, they had picked a kitten out of a litter and brought it to Grandma. It was now easy to see how her father's absence had triggered so much grief—she was thinking, "If this is what we do to kitties, what will happen to me?" Informed at last, her mother could explain that mothers, fathers and children stay close all their lives, and cats and kittens don't. Amy seemed satisfied, closed her eyes, and slept for fourteen hours. The next day, she was much more relaxed. Amy shed her grief first and talked about it later, when she could digest the information she needed. Crying first, talking second, then new understandings—this is often how it goes.

- **If you see that your child is afraid of something specific, reassure him that you'll protect him from that particular danger.**

Your reassurances serve as a gentle reminder of reality for a child who is awash with feelings. For example, "Mommy will come back after shopping. She will always come back to you." "Randy didn't mean to break your glider. He's sorry, too." "Your knee will heal up soon. The hurt won't last much longer." Don't expect your child to stop crying just because you say it's safe. Do give the reassurances you think he might need as he works toward his own sense of safety.

- **Don't pass judgment on what your child feels.**

This is hard to do! We are so accustomed to seeing the world only from our own vantage point. If we don't feel sad, no one else should, either. But children's feelings are like their own personal weather system, which is affected by forces often unseen by you.

To tell your child he should feel happy when he is sad is roughly as effective as telling a rainstorm to go away. Phrases like, "I'm sorry you feel so sad," or "I'll stay right here with you while it's hard," give your child permission to address and work through bad feelings. Phrases like, "Don't feel sorry for yourself, you started this fight!" and "It's only a torn paper. Quit acting like such a baby!" only shame a child. They work against your goal of helping your child rebuild his sense of well-being.

As you listen, you are not necessarily condoning your child's feelings, nor are you spoiling him. You are helping him recover. Children cry only when they are too upset to think. Feelings of upset can overpower a child and drive him to do things that don't make sense, which is exactly why your child is trying to cry them away. He hates to be off track, out of control of his life. As you listen, you drain the power these feelings have over your child. His own good judgment will return once you've listened thoroughly.

As your child cries, you may hear strong complaints about you or about other important people in your child's life. "You don't love me, and you never did!" "I wish you weren't my Mommy." "I hate you, Dad! Everybody else's Dad is better than you." "I hate my brother. I want to kill him! He stinks and I never want to see him again!" These are the kinds of things that children say while they are working through upsets. To cry away the hurt and regain their good nature, children need what one friend of mine calls "freedom of the mouth." If they can cry and tell you the worst of how they feel, their bitterness will drain away. (It helps to let a child know "However you feel, I'll always love you.") Don't take these feelings too personally. What a child says as he is crying isn't his lifetime evaluation of you. It represents only the hurt he's busy flushing out. He'll be back in touch with how good you are just as soon as he's rid of these prickly feelings.

- **Allow plenty of time for your child to cry.**

Your child will cry first about the incident that just happened, and may then go on to cry about other important things without

telling you that he has switched topics. If listening is a new approach in your family, his cries may at first be long and hearty; half an hour or an hour would not be unusual. He has been waiting for this opportunity for quite a while. The warmer and kinder you are, the longer and more intensely he will cry because he is relieved to feel your support and caring. Many of us remember having tears come to our eyes when someone was unexpectedly kind to us at a time of crisis. For your child, it's just like that. The safer things are, the more fully he can show you his feelings and the deeper his sense of relief and well-being will be after his cry is over.

At the mention of time, we parents throw up our hands in frustration. Where are we supposed to come by these half-hours to sit and listen to one of our children? Who will make the dinner? Who will referee the squabbles the other children are bound to have? Time is a precious commodity in the lives of parents and most of us bridle at the thought of spending more time or trying harder.

There is no easy answer to the problem of lack of time. However, many parents find that when you treat crying as a recovery process, you are relieved of certain unpleasant duties. Scolding, worrying and endlessly trying to placate your child when he is irritable are unnecessary. Now, when nothing satisfies your cranky child, you can simply sit down with him in your arms for a few moments and allow him to cry to his heart's content, knowing that it's his turn to work through his sadness and your turn to relax, listen and let your love seep back into his heart.

- **Sleep may follow a child's extended cry.**

There are a couple of ways sleep may play a part in this recovery process. At the end of a hearty cry, a child may yawn a few times, nestle into your arms and fall quickly into a deep sleep. This sleep is important. It gives a child the time and peace to assemble a more rational perspective than his feelings of hurt have allowed. He will most often awaken relaxed and ready to enjoy his life.

Alternatively, sleep will sometimes serve as an intermission rather than as the completion of the recovery process. In the middle of a set of deep, unhappy feelings, a child may head raggedly toward sleep, with continued crying now and then as he drops off. He awakens feeling miserable, with renewed energy to finish tangling with the sizeable chunk of upset he has challenged. When a child cries this long and hard, you are likely to see significant positive changes in his behavior once he is done. He is lifting an especially heavy load from his mind and heart.

- **Look for new and more flexible play, insights, warmth and creativity from your child after you've listened through a full cry.**

Children feel relaxed, well loved and hopeful after a good cry with adult support. In small but significant ways, they let us know that they see things differently now. A child might tenderly brush back the hair from your face after bitter tears and words, venture to play with children he was afraid of, make up little songs of happiness, or finish the math homework he couldn't face before. Keep your eye out for glimpses of his genius for living and loving. You don't want to miss the fuller affection he'll feel toward you, or the signs of his growing confidence. These are the rewards of good listening. You've earned them!

One mother I know was having a heart-wrenching time leaving her daughter at nursery school. The child would cling, complain and cry every morning as the mother left, stop crying soon after, then spend her days shy and withdrawn. Finally, the mother decided to come to school early, begin saying goodbye, and stay with her daughter while she cried the hurt through. For each of the first three mornings, the mother listened to about an hour of deeply felt grief in their car. When her daughter stopped crying, she would gently say, "It's time to go in to school. Are you ready to go with me?" and her daughter would sob and cling some more. Each morning, after what seemed to be an impossibly long cry, the daughter would finally stop, look around a bit, peek in

her lunchbox or play with the steering wheel, and then agree to go to school. The fourth morning, the daughter cried harder than ever for fifteen minutes, then rather quickly decided she wanted to go in. The fifth morning, there were no tears. Daughter gave her mother a big, long hug and said she wanted to go up the walkway to the school by herself. Her mother followed a moment later to sign her in, and saw that her daughter had put her things away and was already at play. The caregivers reported a marked change in the daughter's confidence during the course of that week, a change which was finally evident to the mother on that fifth day.

Another example: A two-year-old boy had an eye infection that needed to be treated with eye drops. As his mother told him about the medicine and how she was going to put it in his eye, he began to cry very hard. Curious about what would happen if she listened and didn't force him down, she held the bottle so he could see it, cuddled up to him and listened while he cried. He began to slow down after about forty-five minutes, so she asked him if he wanted her to open the bottle so he could see the dropper. He cried another ten minutes about that idea. When she asked again, he said yes. She opened the bottle, and demonstrated how the drops would come out. More hard crying. She told him she had to put the drops in, but that he could try the dropper out first if he wanted. He touched it, and threw himself back to cry again.

After some time, he got up and started to squeeze the medicine out of the dropper carefully into the bottle. His mother let him practice awhile and then reminded him that they had to get this medicine into his eyes. He cried again, but for a short time only. Then he asked if he could do it himself. She told him he could try. He lay back, she put the proper amount of medicine into the dropper, and he unblinkingly squeezed two drops into each eye, with only one misplaced splash on his nose. She was amazed. Thereafter, he was utterly calm about eye drops and sometimes chose to put them in himself.

Children who, like the young ones above, are given support to cry fully about the challenges that face them are eventually able to develop surprising confidence in their own abilities. It may require a series of many sessions, during which your child feels utterly helpless, in order to clear away a hurt. But the child you see after each cry will feel and act more confidently than before.

Listening to Children Isn't Easy for Parents

Listening to a crying child is a simple act, quite beneficial to the child, but it's not easy. To be fully present with our children while they recover from their upsets, we parents need times when our thoughts and feelings are heard, too. Our children's strong emotions stir up our own. We have lots to talk about: how difficult it is to be parents, how much we love our children, the things they do that irritate us, our worries, our disappointments, our hopes for them. This is where Listening Partnerships (agreements between parents to take turns listening fully to each other) can be of help. As we extend our trust to a listener, we understand better how a child tries to extend his trust to us. As we let a listener know how sad and tired we get, we develop more patience with our child's attempts to recover from his troublesome feelings.

Our Mission

Hand in Hand improves the lives of parents and children by nurturing the parent-child connection. To learn more about the *Parenting by Connection* approach and *Listening Tools* for parents and professionals, contact:

For further information, contact:

Hand in Hand Parenting

555 Waverley Street, #25

Palo Alto, CA 94301

650 322-5323

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