

CONNECTING!

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Parents Leadership Institute's E-Mail Newsletter
Volume 1, Number 2 - October 29, 2001

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PLI Events Calendar (San Francisco Bay Area) can be found at
www.parentleaders.org/Classes.html

Patty Wipfler will be speaking in Van Nuys, California on the weekend of January 14, 2002. Details in our next Connecting!.

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Holiday Meltdowns are Predictable and Important

Holiday time is approaching. Halloween, Ramadan, Thanksgiving, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, and Christmas create a time of year with lots of opportunities and challenges. Here are a few thoughts to put in your back pocket as the holidays approach.

First, Halloween can be distressing for very young children. Children five and under often don't have the perspective that underneath the masks and makeup are people who mean no harm. For many toddlers, even a benign clown or princess can set off a fearful reaction. The fears children feel aren't a laughing matter--their fright shoots right through their emotional system as though something dangerous was really happening to them. We adults know better, but our understanding and self-confidence can't be transplanted by words into our children. So to keep your child from unnecessary moments of fright, which can erode his confidence, it's a good idea to stay with what **he** is comfortable doing on Halloween. You may have to give up wearing your cat costume, or give up your expectation that he will wear the pumpkin costume you made for him, or greet the trick-or-treaters. You can take that photo of him in his costume you've been dying to take later in the week, after he's had plenty of time to become accustomed to the costume or to the funny make up, at his own pace, with no pressure or hurry. It's hard to erase fright from a child's mind. On Halloween, you have a chance to prevent that fright in the first place.

When any holiday or birthday rolls toward a family, it puts extra demands and stress on the parents, and the children tend to become infected with stress too. They get less relaxed time with us, 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. It's no wonder that feelings ride higher for us all!

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. This is THE WAY THINGS ARE with all young children, not just with your young children. It's almost a law of physics--a special event means that big feelings will erupt in public. 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 just have to let it out. Their systems have this built-in "emotion ejection system" built 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!

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.") 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), so he feels more connected to you, and regains 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. What children need is simple. They need the chance to have the cry, express the disappointment, do the tantrum, 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. Their need to cry is as wholesome as their need for sleep--it's one of the things that keeps their minds in good working order. They're not crying to embarrass or manipulate, they're crying to offload bad feelings so they can feel better again. The fact that the meltdown happens in public often means that life has been going so fast in private that they couldn't find a way to catch your attention there.

When others criticize (which is something you also can depend upon) you don't need to buy into their worry or disapproval of you and your child. You can 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 hear about 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!"

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 you know lets you cry. Your mind will release the tensions that pinch, no matter what way you find to acknowledge that you need some meltdown time too.

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Success at Home: A Big Cry, Then a Big Leap.

"My son was just a little over one year old. He was used to being latched to me, having me always right there next to him. I was lying down with him while he was napping, but got up to do something in the living room. He woke up without me right there, and he was furious! I came to him, held him, and listened to his feelings for about 45 minutes, until he felt better."

"Immediately after that, he said his first sentence! Until then, he had been putting at most two words together. He said very clearly, 'That's a big red truck.' This was directly after crying for 45 minutes. He cried hard, he came out of it a completely calm child, and then, out came this perfect sentence! To me, this is proof that crying helped his mind made a big leap in language skill." --a mother in San Bruno, California

Please send your stories of how you've used the PLI approach to parenting. We'd love to hear about what you've learned, and to share it with other parents.

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NEWS--Web Site Expansion, Audio Tape in Spanish, Donations Easy to Make

PLI's web site now has several new features. You can find articles posted in Spanish, success stories from parents, a place to sign up for **Connecting!**, and a search feature. We hope you enjoy and use this expanding resource.

We've done a great recording of **Cómo Fijar Límites A Nuestros Niños (Setting Limits with Children)**. It's available for \$6 from PLI. Call us at (650) 322-5323 to order.

You now can give a tax-deductible donation to Parents Leadership Institute by clicking the Donate Now! button on the splash page of <www.parentleaders.org>. It only takes a moment! We'll use your support to improve our outreach, to offer our publications at very affordable prices, and to grant scholarships to our classes for parents and parent leaders. We'd love to add you to the PLI Family of Donors.

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Book Nook

This month, we'd like to recommend the book, The War Against Parents, by Sylvia Ann Hewlett and Cornel West (Houghton Mifflin, 1998.) A readable rundown of how the oppression of parents is built into our society. The perspective offered includes African American parents, and the book ends with a succinct set of proposals for reworking our economy to support the work of parenting. A helpful "big picture" book.

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Parents Leadership Institute is a non-profit organization. We develop listening, parenting, and leadership skills among parents and people who work with parents and children.

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