

CONNECTING!

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Parents Leadership Institute's E-Mail Newsletter
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SIBLING SOLUTIONS

Raising one child is challenging in our fast-paced and adult-oriented society. Raising more than one child brings added joys, and often, difficult feelings that start with the older child and eventually infect the younger child too. Those feelings can be lifted by a few important strategies which, employed early and often, can clear the way for rich, playful, and loving relationships between children. Since these strategies are not the typical, "Don't do that or I'll send you to your room" approach, they are challenging to use. What's great is the results they bring over time.

There are many facets to this subject, so we'll post this article in two parts, one below and one in our next **Connecting!** on May 15th.

Preparing for a Brother or Sister

Every child has longings for more time and more closeness with his parents! These longings are a big part of why it's hard to want to go to bed at night, hard to get dressed to go to day care or to Grandma's, and why it can even be upsetting to see parents talking, cuddling, or talking on the phone! Every child needs a chance to air his feelings about wanting more, indeed, about wanting ALL your time and attention.

To prepare your child for the challenge of sharing you, we recommend two seemingly opposite steps. The first is to offer him "Special Time," during which you pour on your attention, your approval, and closeness. You allow your child to choose what play he wants to do with you. You can start "Special Time" by saying expectantly, "OK, we have 15 minutes, and I'll play with you any way you want to!" with a lively tone. Then, keep your attention focused on your child (let the phone ring, and postpone your urge to get a cup of tea). It's surprisingly hard to do--because parenting is stressful, we almost always try to teach, try to make ourselves more comfortable, or try to get little jobs done while we're playing with our children! What Special Time does is to help your child, and you, too, notice that you are paying loving attention and letting HIM make decisions for awhile.

The second important preparation step is to notice when your child longs for exclusive closeness with you. Is it when new people are around? Is it when you both arrive at day care or at the grandparents' house? Is it at bedtime, with pleas for story after story to keep you close? When a child feels upset about a possible separation, however minor it may be, his feelings of needing you are ready to be released. He needs the reassurance that you love him AND the chance to cry as long as possible to drain the reservoir of sadness about you going. He can best do that with you close, telling him, "I'm going to leave, but I'll come back. I'll always come back to you." Or, in the case of bedtime, "You're safe here. I'll be in the next room, and I'll see you in the morning." (See our article, "Healing the Hurt of Separation" at www.parentleaders.org/Articles) If your child feels safe enough, he or she will cry, and the listening you do while he feels desperate for closeness will help heal that feeling of never having enough of you. Often, at the end of a good cry, a child is just fine about you leaving. He needed to grieve, so he could take in the good points of the situation he's in with a lighter heart and with your love tucked under his wing.

These two steps, repeated over time, help prepare a child for the challenge of a sibling's demands on your attention.

Playfully Reassuring the Older Child

After a new sibling has arrived, an older child's feelings will be both large with love and wonder, and tight with upset about his sibling's intrusion into his relationship and time with you. Children are as aware of the beauty and preciousness of their little brother or sister as you are, and they WANT to love and be loved in that relationship. But there's no way to fully prevent the negative feelings from arising. Fortunately, those feelings will release in laughter, and they'll release in tears and tantrums, as dependably as dirt will come out in the wash.

One of the more fruitful ways to get this healing process going is to find a way to play "I want you!" with your older child, in long playtimes or just for moments at a time, whatever you can manage. "I want you" games come in 100 variations. You and your child will work out some good ones, but here are a few examples.

You could begin by getting down on the floor and announcing "I have a hundred kisses for you! Where shall I start?!" and crawling awkwardly toward your child. You can make great efforts to get her and cuddle her, letting her wriggle away and dance just out of reach, laughing while you try to deliver your kisses. Or play can be set up with both parents, one parent playfully pulling the child toward him and saying, "I want to play with Sally!" and the other pulling her back and saying, "No, you can't have her! I haven't had enough of her yet today!" If this playful tug-of-war brings laughter, keep playing! It fills up a child's hunger for attention and importance. Another "I want you" game is to announce, "Where's Sally!? I HAVE to find Sally! I'm lonesome for Sally!" and to search all around (even though Sally is in plain sight) until you discover her and scoop her up in your arms for lots of cuddles. Holding your older child like a baby, and appreciating his fingers, toes, perfect ears, and beautiful eyes is another kind of sweet play that reassures a child that his uniqueness hasn't been forgotten.

One mother I know somehow got into a game that her 5-year-old loved: she would twinkle and say, "I'm going to lick you!" and run through the house after her daughter, who would laugh and try to get away. At some point, the game would turn, and the Mom would be running from her daughter, who had her tongue out, ready to pounce. They were silly and lively and both would laugh hard--the Mom was a bit embarrassed to tell me how much fun they had!

The laughter your child does while you playfully show that you can't live without him or her heals some of the hurt of seeing you attending the other child so often. And it gives you a delightful way to openly appreciate your older child.

When Your Child Needs You and You Can't Help Right Away

When children cry for more closeness, or get upset because you can't help them right away, we have an excellent chance to help them to fully release the sadness they feel. When the child you're not tending feels needy, you can send him an invitation to be close. A loving look or a tender word, an invitation to come and snuggle your back or be embraced by your one free arm, or if you're standing, to come and sit on your feet or says, "I want to help" even when you can't.

If your child begins to tantrum or cry, an EXCELLENT thing is happening! He's using the offer of closeness that you gave as the sweetness he needed to begin to release his pent-up feelings of upset. Sometimes children "work on" their feelings of helplessness, too, and feel like they CAN'T walk over to you. They sit down and feel and act as though they haven't any power at all. There's usually very heavy crying, as they remember feelings that may come from infancy, when they really COULDN'T get to you when they wanted to. After they've cried awhile, with you encouraging them gently to come to you, they'll rediscover their ability to walk again, and will have worked through that chunk of stored feelings that was probably making them whiny at other times, too.

Crying and tantrums heal the hurt, although by all appearances, your child feels worse than ever while it's happening. If you keep offering loving words and gentle looks while he works his feelings through, he'll feel closer to you and much relieved when he's done, and he won't be blaming his unhappiness on his sibling. His unhappiness will have been scrubbed away by the heartfelt emotional work he just did!

Key to this strategy is your understanding that your love is enough, even when you can't help your child right away. Your attention during an explosion of feelings, even from the other side of the room, helps your child. Your voice and your eyes convey your caring, and help to right the wrongs that your child is feeling. You are not neglecting him, nor are you causing more pain. While you patiently listen to a passionately upset child, you are doing a good job as a parent, and your child is doing a good job of shedding the bad feelings he doesn't want to live with.

When One Sibling Is Rough With Another

Children who touch too roughly, or hug too tightly, or hit or poke or hurt their siblings are sending clear signals that they have some upsets that need to be listened to. Even very young children can be gentle with babies, as long as they are feeling "filled up" with attention, and relaxed. So any sign of harshness from one sibling to another can be taken as a sign that the child is not feeling connected or relaxed enough to function thoughtfully. When you notice that a child has been rough, scolding him or ordering him to do things correctly won't help. It only frightens your child, and make it even less likely that he'll be able to act thoughtfully.

What does help is to move in quickly and gently. Very gently but firmly stop the tense child from touching the younger child, but don't remove him. Say, "I'll help you be next to Sammy," and guide his hands or his kisses so that they land softly. Move so that you can make eye contact with the older child, and invite him kindly to take a look at you. Usually, because the child is tense with upset, he can't look at you for long, and when he tries, the upset begins to make him want to go away, or to fight you. Gently stay with him and keep him close, continuing to let him feel your attention and your support. Usually, the child will move rather quickly into a tantrum or a big cry about wanting you or not wanting you, or about wanting to touch the baby, or not wanting the baby. All those feelings are important facets of the nugget of upset he's trying to offload. If you stay with him, without criticism, he'll be able to cry or tantrum it through.

We Parents Are Full of Feelings, Too!

And if you can find another parent or good listener to hear your feelings and allow you to show them, you'll find relief for the feelings that come up when you can't fill all your children's wishes, or when you get driven to not liking them when they fuss and complain. We parents need listening time too! Paying attention to children's needs is a job that puts every thought and resource you have to work, and every parent has many moments every day when we don't know where the energy for the next task will come from. Part of what makes the job hard is how little we feel anyone else's attention as we

give so much of our attention. So Listening Partnerships, although often initially awkward to set up, can bring a surprising amount of relief—someone agrees to pay attention to YOU, in exchange for your attention for them. A simple exchange, with interesting and often deeply helpful results.

On May 15th, we'll talk about helping siblings when they squabble over treasured things or defended space, and about helping them when one has hurt the other before you could get there to help. We'd love to hear anecdotes from you as you try these ideas in your family!

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PARENT SUCCESS STORY

A Dad Helps With A Dinnertime Fight

My son (who is older) and daughter were sitting at the table. It was dinnertime, and my son almost always finds a way to get upset with his sister at dinner! I prepared myself mentally beforehand, telling myself that their fight was going to happen, and that I could intervene without getting angry.

I sat my son right next to my daughter, instead of sitting between them (which I often do to try to keep a fight from happening.) We hold hands before a meal, and take a moment to give thanks. So I said, "OK, let's hold hands." My son immediately protested. I knew he would. I said, as gently as I could, "Come on, hold her hand now." That's all it took to get them going. My daughter got upset, but I concentrated on my son. He said, "Don't force me!" And I said, "I'm not forcing you, but it would be good to hold your sister's hand." I didn't make him do it, but I didn't give up on the idea that he COULD do it. He began to cry, and ran from the table. I followed after him into the next room, and he cried hard about how his sister always hurts him and teases him and kicks him. I kept quiet about the things I know he does to her, and didn't argue at all, just listened with all my belief to the wrongs he felt. He cried for a long time. He didn't come back to the table a completely loving brother, and I didn't mention the holding hands thing again. He still wasn't feeling great. But later that night, I heard him saying very sweetly, "Do you want me to pick you up? Want me to carry you?" Normally he doesn't want to get physically close to her at all. And as I do more of this listening, I see that they're starting to play together more, and he's hugging her sometimes. It's unbelievable, actually! I'm really excited that things are loosening up between them.

It's a real challenge for us, because we are so tired of their fights and their attitudes toward each other. It's hard to be kind and gentle when the fights begin. But we're getting the payoff, bit by bit. --a dad in Oakland, CA

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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

** We now have copies of “I’m Chocolate, You’re Vanilla,” by Marguerite A. Wright, PhD, on sale at PLI. It’s a book for parents of children of all races about how children’s perception of skin color and racial identity develops throughout childhood, and how parents can encourage both self-worth and tolerance at home and in the schools.

You can order it by phone at 650-322-5323 for \$15 (paperback), plus tax for Californians. Shipping and handling \$3. We’re proud to help distribute this cutting edge information.

** Parent Leaders Training Begins in Watsonville. PLI is beginning a 6-week training class, to be held bilingually in English and Spanish, in Watsonville in mid-April. It is sponsored by the La Manzana Community Resource Center, WIC, and Answers Benefiting Children (ABC). See our events calendar for more information. We’ll do another training this summer on the Peninsula: more news about that in our next issue!

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BOOK NOOK

“The War Against Parents: What We Can Do for America’s Beleaguered Moms and Dads,” by Sylvia Ann Hewlett and Cornel West. Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, New York, 1998.

I found this book to be unique in its ability to give a perspective on the work of parenting in the U.S. that fully includes parents from all backgrounds and economic strata. Hewlett and West illustrate the societal neglect of our vital nurturing work with facts, but don’t overwhelm the reader. And there’s a highly interesting conclusion—a Bill of Rights for Parents that is based on economic tweaks to our national policy that are do-able and would make a huge difference in the amount of time, choice, and connection in the lives of parents and children. --Patty Wipfler

Hewlett has helped found a parents lobby called Parents Unite, which you can find at <http://www.ParentsUnite.org>.

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Parents Leadership Institute is a non-profit organization that fosters healthy parent-child relationships that last a lifetime.

We give parents simple, concrete tools to build and rebuild a close relationship with their children, and to lead their families well. We promote parent-to-parent support founded on mutual respect, listening, and the desire of parents to love children well.

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