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Parents Leadership Institute's E-Mail Newsletter
Volume 2, Number 6 – August 20, 2002

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Parents Leadership Institute is a non-profit organization that fosters healthy parent-child relationships that will 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 their children well.

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* PLI will produce a film on listening to very young children.

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A fresh PLI Events Calendar (San Francisco Bay Area) can be found at
<http://www.parentleaders.org/Classes.html>

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The Best We Can Do

I'm struck again and again by how hard each parent I know tries to do well by his child! We make great efforts, moment by moment and day by day. Once the efforts begin, we never stop caring. We never stop trying. We never stop noticing how we're doing. And we frequently worry about how our children are doing.

We make our constant effort to parent, without much chance to stand back and say, "Gee, it's going well!" "Isn't she going to turn out nicely!" "How strong and loving

he is!" "They're bound to turn out just fine!" Matter of fact, most of us can't say that we're ever really sure that our children are going to be fine. And some of the time, we can't say that we're going to be fine, either! We push forward so often on low energy, little information, not much help, and too little patience, especially for ourselves.

We Have Reason to be Pleased

Here are a few of the things I think it helps to remember, in order to be pleased with ourselves at the end of the day.

Parenting IS hard work. It's wonderful, deeply moving, really challenging, and difficult. Difficult not because children are inherently difficult, but because:

- we're expecting perfection of ourselves in a situation in which we haven't been trained, coached, mentored, or assisted.
- it takes a lot of attention to stay flexible and patient with a young child for even a couple of hours.
- there are no "second string" players to call in when we, the primary players, are worn or sick or don't know what to do.
- children have lots of feelings every day, and very few of us grownups have ever been clued in as to what to do with human emotion. Our only training has been to suppress feelings, and that tactic doesn't work well with children, or with us. Feelings come squirting out anyhow!
- our children have very high expectations of us and of life in general. We sense those high expectations, meet them as often as we can, and feel badly when we hit a hard patch.
- most of us didn't get the quality of attention and generosity that we're trying to give to our children. Our parents often improved greatly on the job their parents did, and their parents had improved on the job done with them. We can't see long-range success we're creating in the long chain of parenting effort that we're part of.

So parenting can feel really hard at times.

And still, it's the wonderful sweet center of our lives, and our love. Our children love us deeply, long to be with us, and see how special we are. They beckon us into play and fun that we wouldn't otherwise think to have. They give us permission to be silly, to be sweet, to be tender. They give us permission to love without limit. And we do. They thrive on our love. The relationships we build with them are precious.

Breaking the Grip of Exhaustion

Here are a few thoughts about what helps the cycle of worry and exhaustion that can weigh us down, and erode our enjoyment of mother- and fatherhood:

- **You deserve help.** Don't stop working to organize it! Family, friends, other parents of young children all can provide a welcome break, or a word of encouragement about how your child is doing.

- You don't deserve anyone's criticism. Spoken and unspoken judgment can weigh on our hearts and minds, and wear us down over time. And parents are "free targets" in a way that would be unheard of for members of groups that have organized to protect their interests as a group. No one would think of going up to a senior citizen who was using a walker, and tell him that he should be doing his walking some other way. But people assume that a parent with a child who's whining in public should have a piece of their mind, or should at least have a disapproving glance. You don't have to accept poor treatment. You can set limits with other grownups--you do it all the time with your children. You have the right to take the stance that, "This isn't an easy day, and I'm doing the best that I can. If you want to help me, I'll tell you what I'd like you to do. If you are not going to help, then I ask you to keep your thoughts to yourself."

- **You deserve time to debrief.** Parenting takes a lot of thought and emotional effort! Someone listening to you, even if all you say is "I'm so tired!" over and over, will help. When our thoughts and feelings stay trapped inside our minds, they eat up our energy and keep us concentrated on our troubles. Saying what's on your mind, and showing the feelings you control all day long, is a big relief! Split 20 minutes of listening time with someone who can actually let you talk uninterrupted, and who will keep an attitude of respect for you throughout, no matter what your thoughts or feelings are. It makes a difference!

- **You may need to address exhaustion.** When you're so tired that resting doesn't really refresh you, you've become exhausted. At that point, it's hard to do anything but march in place, getting the most necessary things done. Your ability to solve problems creatively is at low ebb. What helps an exhausted parent is to try to relax near someone who cares, and to have that person be quiet and "watch over" you, while you either talk, or sleep, or just say how tired you are, over and over, and how hard it is to be that tired. Someone to watch over you makes all the difference. Exhaustion means that big feelings, usually of isolation or too little hope or no one really caring, are mixed in with the tiredness. Having someone care and watch over you helps with that emotional load. A good cry is often the result, either during a rest or some time thereafter. And that good cry can relieve the heavy feel of things. For some of us, the person we can call on is a partner, or perhaps a brother or sister, or a really good friend. For some, the relief of being alone after the children have gone to bed brings that sense of protected time, for others, a beloved pet, and for many, remembering a divine being. As long as we feel some love and caring coming toward us while we rest, we're on our way out of exhaustion. To set up this kind of respite time, we need to ask for exactly what we want--no one comes along to say, "You rest. I'll watch over things, and guard you for an hour." Perhaps friends should know to help with the exhaustion of hard working parents, but

most people are shy to offer, or caught up in their own sagas. So we need to invite them to help.

The Bottom Line

The bottom line is that even on a day when we've been hard on our children or hard on ourselves, we've done the best that we could do! We may need to acknowledge that our best was pretty crummy today. And we certainly need to keep reaching to build good support for ourselves and for the work that's so important to us. But every parent can go to bed at night saying, "I did my best." And every child will wake up in the morning glad to be awake, loving his parents and eager for the best that we can do again that day!

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Parent Success Story: Supporting a Toddler is Hard and Worthwhile

This is what one mother of a toddler wrote, after taking a 4-week PLI class in Playlistening:

"The PLI Playlistening approach is hard work! Staying fully emotionally present with a toddler for even just two hours and dealing as completely as possible with each emotional upset and frustration is exhausting. It's obvious that my son feels better after being listened to like that, but it's really hard to recognize and validate the tough emotional experiences these little ones go through every day."

"In one day my daughter had a bigger kid at Gymboree take away the big red ball that she was playing with and refuse to let her play with it again. A child in the park with a toy lawn mower refused to share it with her even though my daughter followed the child and mower all over the park for over fifteen minutes. The child let her touch the knobs for maybe 30 seconds, but that's it. Then at Borders, another little kid took the train my daughter wanted to play with and ran off with it, then came back and played with it near her but would not let her touch it. Did I mention that in the middle of this day we had to wait for an hour at the pediatrician and that my daughter was infuriated by the doctor sticking lights in her nose and mouth?"

"I got down with her and talked with her about each of these upsets, acknowledged how she might be feeling, listened to her cry, and sat with her when she laid down and kicked her heels into the carpet at the bookstore. I told her I could see how much she wanted to play with the mower, but I have to tell you, half way through the lawn mower incident, I was about ready to cry myself. It's heartbreaking how little they have control over and how passionately they want what they want."

"Saturday's class made it really clear to me that it is expedient, less messy, less embarrassing and not so emotionally draining for me NOT to deal with my child's emotions, especially since they often come so fast and furiously. Too bad my kid's not here for my convenience or to make my life easier! ;-)"

"Now I'm trying to see myself as her Emotional Coach. Developmentally a lot of what she is doing now is learning about emotions. She's practicing with them. It's loud, it's messy but it's not about me, my parenting skills, or what I'm doing for or with my child at that moment. It's just what she needs to be doing right now. She's showing me the emotional weather that goes on inside her. When I muster the energy to meet her tough emotions head on and be there with her through the storm, it dissipates and we're happier to be together on the other side."

"I would recommend PLI classes to anyone working with babies or small children. It's challenging work but I think it's a bit of a revolution in dealing with emotions and it makes a lot of sense to me. I think it will make a difference in raising happier, healthier more emotionally intelligent children." --a mother in Half Moon Bay, California.

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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

** In September, PLI is offering a Playevening for children 3 and under and their parents, and a PlayMorning for children 4 to 9 years old. The evening will be Thursday, September 5th, and the morning on September 28th. Parents who have had some introduction to the PLI approach, their children, and relatives or friends are welcome. We play hard (pillowfights and chasing are big with the older children), make sure each child gets Special Time with his or her parent, and get Playlistening going when we can. Often, children find ways to let big feelings bubble to the surface after an hour or so of play and attention, and we mentor parents as they listen to the feelings and help their children work them through. It's a place where it's safe for your child to be himself, where children's difficulties are seen as opportunities for us all to learn, and where every parent gets listened to at some time during the morning. Join us! For details, see our events calendar at www.parentleaders.org.

** Buy our booklets, tapes, and videos online! You now can obtain everything we publish with a click of your mouse at www.parentleaders.org We're pleased to make it easy for parents to obtain good, effective information from PLI. If you are buying more than 10 items, you will receive a 10% discount from PLI if you order by mail, fax, or

over the phone. We don't offer this discount online, so keep our phone number handy too: 650-322-5323, fax (650) 322-5179.

** PLI has received funding to produce a film on listening to infants and toddlers! We will be taping this fall, and hope to have the film ready for your viewing pleasure by April 1st. We'll give some guidelines for helping very young children with the feelings and frustrations of being small and learning so much so fast, and will show examples of parents supporting their very young children with information, play, and attention. We'll let you know when it's done!

** We're beginning a training program for parent leaders from underserved populations to master the PLI approach, so that our approach can reach more parents with support, understanding, and tools for effective parenting. We are hoping to raise \$500 each for 10 people from three Bay Area communities. Help us build PLI's capacity and effectiveness with your donation today. It's easy! Our DONATE NOW button is on the splash page of our web site. Together we can build a culture in which the work of parents and intelligence of children are respected and understood.

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BOOK NOOK

: "Selling Out America's Children" by David Walsh, Ph.D. Published by Fairview Press, Minneapolis, 1995.

This book is short, smart, and practical in its outline of the thinking each of us needs to do about our family policies in a quick-fix, consumption-oriented society. Parents and children are prime targets for advertising and mass media. We parents want to promote closeness, generosity, mutual support, and play for all members of our families; the bit of sensible urging that Dr. Welsh offers may be useful in supporting our own best judgment to say no to some of the intrusions of commercial culture. --Patty Wipfler

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