

Three Tools to Stop the Hitting

by Patty Wipfler

Odd as it may seem, children who hit are children who are afraid. The fears that cause trouble for a child who hits usually have their roots in some frightening experience earlier in her life, even though she may not *seem* frightened at all. To manage her fear, the frightened child develops aggressive behavior that flares any time she feels tense. Instead of crying or saying she feels scared when her fears are triggered, she tightens up, can't ask for help, and lashes out.

You don't need to know why a child is fearful, in order to help her. What's needed are measures to increase her sense of safety and connection with you, whether you are her parent, her caregiver, or a loving relative or friend. And you also need to take proactive steps to prevent her from landing any impulsive swats.

As you connect and protect, a child will begin to share with you the passionate feelings that drive her impulse to hit. Listening to a child's feelings, while preventing her from hurting anyone, allows a child to release the underlying fear, so she can relax and see others as her friends, rather than as a threat.

First, build a stronger connection. Set up opportunities to connect more often, and more fully. [Special Time](#) is a tool that's ideal for building connection. If it's your own child, try to do a short Special Time very early in the day, perhaps upon waking, so that your child begins the day with your offer to do whatever they she wants to do for the first 5 minutes or 10 minutes of the day. Pay warm, affectionate attention. This helps a child see that she is important to you, even if there are other siblings, a morning schedule and early phone calls you have to attend to. It puts first things first in the family.

If the child is someone you know outside your family, try Special Time or [Playlistening](#) when you first see her.

On a play date, for instance, you might set up some roughhousing or hide and seek games to involve the children who will be playing together. Add yourself to the mix, get down on the floor, and play with affection. See if you can get laughter going by taking the less powerful role. Get the children working together to "get" you with pillows or balloons or by jumping out of nowhere to "scare" you during hide and seek. When there's laughter (without tickling) and they are "winning," you're Playlistening. The laughter and sense of safety and power in Playlistening helps children bond with each other and releases tension. It helps them get a sense that they are safe, treasured, and secure in your presence.

At a family gathering, you might organize a tag game or an "I want to give you a hug" game that the children can win. You might, for instance, open your arms to try to give them

big bear hugs. But stumble, fall, and fail. They will love getting the best of you. Nuzzle them now and then, but be sure not to be a very competent hugger. Make eye contact while you play. Be bamboozled by them, but keep bouncing back to try again. This kind of play is sheer heaven for children.

The child who tends to hit may, during such a playtime, find a chance to unpack her upsets in a more workable way. She might bang an elbow, or find a defect in the cracker you offer her, or look you in the eye and then start to use a crayon on your wall. When you approach her gently to [bring a limit](#), she has a reason to cry and perspire or tantrum. This expression of emotion is the beginning of the healing process for the feelings that she carries, most likely, the same feelings that sometimes cause her to hit.

Second, when she cries, Staylisten. This means staying close, not taking the ensuing emotional storm personally, and letting the child know that you're there for her. You pour in support; she pours out her fear and upset. Often, a child goes quickly from "My cracker is broken, I need a new cracker!" to "I need my Mommy!" and from complaint to sheer panic. Listen. *No need to try to fix anything.* You are just the right person to listen to her. Let her feel that panic about having bumped her elbow, about needing a whole cracker, or about any other urgent need of the moment. There will be time later for a band-aid, or to consider the cracker again. For now, let her show you how upset she is. If she's missing Mommy or Daddy, let her know that they will always come back. Reassure her that you'll watch over her and keep her safe.

Feelings will pour out with great passion and force. Although it looks like dire things are happening, this outpouring is actually a deep relief for a child's emotional mind. The passion you see is what drives her impulsive behavior. A genuine internal healing is occurring. All the child needs is your warmth, eye contact and a few words about the fact that she's safe with you. When the storm has passed, the child will feel a thousand percent safer with you than ever before, whether she's your own child or a child in your care for some other reason.

Third, if building the connection doesn't quickly result in a big cry about some small thing, then you'll need to stay close to your impulsive hitter. Watch for signs of increasing tightness. Children often (but not always) give you signals that their negative feelings are bubbling up. Their voices become edgy. Their faces lose mobility and sometimes lose color as well. They avoid natural, communicative eye contact. They begin to try to control situations. When you see this, move closer. Don't try to prevent hitting with words like, "OK, let's take turns here. There's no need to get upset." The upset is already inside of the child. Once a child has signaled that she is in trouble, there are no words that can make that trouble disappear. What you *can* do is to make sure that her impulsive behavior hurts no one.

So proactively set a limit. For instance, you might try hooking your arm around the frequent hitter's midsection, and gently nudging her a step away from the other children. You are not forbidding any further play. You are simply insuring safety. You can say, "I need to put my arm here, Rosie. You can play, but I am going to come with you and keep my arm here for awhile, so everyone stays safe." Your sense of calm and your gentle touch will probably help her notice the tension that's rising in her. She won't want you there. She might squirm and try to push you away. Stand your ground. "I'm going to keep you safe. I know you want to play, and you can. I will go with you where you go." She may fume, and work her way into a good cry.

Your limit is helpful. You noticed trouble coming, and intervened in the kindest possible way. You are preventing a frightened child from feeling ashamed because her impulses overcame her and hurt someone again. You are preventing another child from being victimized. You are doing the responsible thing as a parent or guardian of the play environment. You haven't shamed her, haven't isolated her, but also haven't let her impulses victimize another child. When she finally bursts into tears, Staylisten. Reassure her that she's a good friend. That other children are glad to play with her. That she will have a good day today, even though things feel hard right now. Let her know that she's safe with you, and you are glad to be with her.

This process can be used again and again, to help a child who carries a knot of fear big enough to require several rounds of proactive limits and emotional release. We have seen children's whole personalities change over time, and their frequently impulsive behavior melt into sensitivity and empathy for the feelings of other children, with repeated chances to play with an attentive adult, and then have good, passionate cries and tantrums in the circle of a kind adult's arms.

Isn't this what we all could use? Someone to move in when we are edgy so we don't splash our upsets on others, and then to listen to us vent our upsets in safety? Someone kind enough to listen until the storm is over and we feel good about our lives again? Children who tend to hit give us a chance to learn this kind of effective intervention—intervention to build a stronger friendship. Intervention that prevents corrosive behavior through listening, so a child can feel safe in her world again.

Here's how it can work:

A mother asked me for help with a two-and-a-half-year-old girl, whose baby brother was four months old. The older child was drawn to her brother, and she was full of an intense desire to be close to him. But her kisses and touches were gentle for only five or ten seconds. They quickly turned to pinches and brusque bumps and sometimes to fingernails pressed into his arm. The mother didn't want to keep her daughter away from the baby, but the girl could not be trusted to be gentle. The



mother had been trying to teach gentle behavior, but with all her demonstration and instruction, her daughter had learned nothing. The mother had already instituted Special Time with her daughter, but that had not relieved the difficulty.

In watching their interaction, I saw that the big sister was like a moth to her baby brother's flame. She couldn't stay away from him, but was impulsive the moment she got close. The mom was exhausted and frustrated.

So I showed the mother how to put her hand on her daughter's tummy as she approached the baby. I encouraged her to say, "I know you want to kiss your brother. You can do that in a little while. Let's just watch him and see what he likes, for now." No need to be unfriendly. No need to instruct. The mother was both ensuring the baby's safety, and telling her daughter, "You love Billy. I can tell. You are such a sweet big sister." With the feel of that limit, the daughter immediately went into a vigorous tantrum, jumping up and down and writhing in her mother's arms. She tried frantically to reach for her baby brother. We told her we saw that she loved him, but said that she could kiss him and touch him a little later, not right now.

Big sister's tantrum and sweaty struggle went on for fifteen or twenty minutes. We stayed positive, listened, and cared as her feelings poured out in her mommy's arms.

When the daughter finally had worked her feelings through and didn't feel frantic any longer, she looked at her Mommy, made sweet eye contact, and began to play with her Mommy's buttons. She laughed a bit, and seemed relaxed. We asked her if she wanted to kiss her brother now, and she did, gently, and then went off to play. The mother's limit and Staylistening had freed her of that compulsion to be near the baby and besiege him with sugar-coated aggression. The mother was pleased, and now knew how to set a limit soon enough to help her daughter when her behavior became impulsive.