

When Your Child Screams, "I Hate You!"

by Patty Wipfler, Founder Hand in Hand Parenting

Q. Recently, when my first-grader is angry or upset, she tells me she hates me! This hurts my feelings, and I really don't know how to respond. I try hard not to react in anger myself, as I know that two angry people usually only make each other angrier. Neither of us needs that!

Do I tell her my feelings are hurt? Send her to her room? Demand an apology? Let it go right by? I want us to find a way to get on a better wavelength with each other. She's a good girl, but I don't want this meanness to continue.

--a mother in CT

Dear Mother:

Good for you for asking all the right questions! It is really confusing to experience the red-faced fury of a child you love and have worked so hard to nurture well. And you're right, responding with your own anger will only inflame an already charged situation. Here are some idea of what *would* be a nurturing response, in addition to your grasp of what *not* to do.

Your goal of getting on a better wavelength with your daughter is right on target! You've put your finger on the key to resolving the situation—to *connect* with her. Not as a technique, not as a “parenting trick,” but because you care, and you *know* she's not herself. You can reach out and bring her back to you. You can offer connection, and stay with her until she can feel you there again. Until your caring gets through to her.

Your daughter trusts you.

Let's first look at the good and healthy side of this kind of interaction. Your daughter trusts you deeply enough to tell you to your face that an awful feeling that has rocked her world. It's a feeling. It bothers her greatly. She's telling you about it. And that's actually good. It's step one in loosening that feeling and shaking it out of her system. All the therapists and counselors and ministers and best friends in our world are aiming to do just that with adults who have run into difficulty in their lives. For painful feelings and unworkable behavior to change, the first step is to let someone know about our troubles.

All of us, not just our children, have episodes of upset, during which our logical, reasonable and cooperative powers are totally sidelined by encompassing and confusing clouds of feelings. The feelings can be of any kind—infatuation, anger, jealousy, embarrassment, loneliness, hatred—but when they pop up again and again, in one situation after another, you know that there's an emotional memory that's causing the

trouble. At some time in the past, the person who feels “I hate you!” has had something very difficult happen to them. Children try to offload that kind of feeling with tears and tantrums, but the fact that the feeling recurs indicates that the project of ejecting that feeling isn’t over.

Children are built to let us know the instant their minds are derailed by feelings. They don’t hide their troubles. They whine, they suck their thumbs, they throw their lunchbox on the floor when they get home, they scream “I hate you!” One way or another, they signal to us, “I’m all wrapped up in emotion, and I can’t think. I don’t know what to do. Here’s the best I can figure out.”

She will work herself free of overwhelming feelings, if you listen and connect.

What helps is to listen while your child shows you all of her feelings. “Freedom of the mouth,” one of my co-workers in childcare used to call it. You offer connection and caring, and your child does the heavy-duty process of crying, having a tantrum, and showing you the full heat of what she feels.

How to Staylisten.

Move gently toward your daughter when she yells, “I hate you.” Tell yourself, “She hates feeling like this. She wants to get back to feeling close to me again. She’s showing me her troubles. She’s trying to free herself of this feeling, and I can help.” As you draw near, her emotions may intensify. When a trusted grownup listens and doesn’t go away, the feelings that are mucking up a child’s mind will thoroughly engulf her. She may feel that everything is terribly wrong, her life is ruined, and you are the cause. A child will cry, and often will be wild with fear or what looks like aggression. Keep yourself safe—don’t allow your child to hurt you, or to trash belongings—and just listen. Listening will soothe her, but the process of getting bad feelings out of the way takes time. Slowly your loving attention will make its way to her heart.

It’s as though your child entered a long emotional bad dream, where the world turned against her. She has to tell you all about it, to get free of these feelings. So let her tell you she hates you. Let her say that you’re the worst mother in the whole wide world. These feelings have no bearing on who you are, or the quality of the parenting you do. They are feelings from a past event, pasted on right now, and pasted on you, because that’s how the emotional healing process works.

If you listen, offer your warmth, and let the emotional bad dream take your child over, while you provide a steady counterbalance to all that awful feeling, she’ll offload the upset, and her clouded perception will clear. We call this Staylistening, and it works beautifully to relieve children of emotional burdens, and bring them back into the circle of our love again. It’s amazing to see the shift from hatred to love, as a child finally realizes that the feeling is gone, and you are still there!

Here's how it can work:

My son, who is 4, my husband, and I were all busy getting ready to go to a friend's house on a Saturday morning. Our neighbors next door, who we are close to, have a 9-year-old. Although we are friends, we have had to limit the time our son spends with their child, because the kind of language he often uses isn't appropriate for our son to hear. They were making preparations for a birthday party for their son, and our son saw this. I told him as he was watching them that we were going to our friends', and that he couldn't go to the party.

Then he picked up a hockey stick and began hitting things—the couch, the floor, scraping it on a rock in the yard, and poking the cat. His father got annoyed, and said harshly, "Come on! You've got to get in the car or we're not going!" Then our son said, "You b____!"

Before I'd read the [Listening to Children booklets](#), I would have gotten into it, too, and scolded him for talking to his Dad that way, and for banging around with the stick. But I've been teaching myself to connect with him when things are bad. I actually figured that he was indignant for good reason—his Dad had spoken very harshly, and threatened him.

So I just decided to try to connect with him. I scooped him up in my arms, sat down on the couch with him, and said, "You really seem to be upset." He looked at me like I was a stranger. I touched him gently and asked him, "Are you upset because you can't go to the party?" He said, "Yeah." I said, "It looks like you feel pretty bad that you don't get to go." His eyes welled up with tears, and he began to cry. I held him, and his Dad came in close, too. We listened to him for some minutes.

When he stopped, I said, "Why don't we call the neighbor, and make sure she remembers to save you some cake." His Dad brought me the phone, and we stayed all snuggled together while I made the call. The neighbor said she would save some cake, and would save him a party bag, too. When he heard this, his whole body relaxed. It was clear that he felt heard, and felt connected again. It was a very sweet little time. He got his things together, ran to the car, and was waiting for us, for a change!

Since I've been connecting and letting him have his feelings instead of scolding or giving orders, he's been so much happier. Listening to him is changing all of our lives!

--a mother in Santa Cruz, CA

Fresh ways to handle “I hate you!”

Almost every parent was once a child who was shouted at by grownups under stress. Almost all of us were called names, and told we were bad at one time or another. Our parents were stressed, and they targeted us, because they had nowhere else to go with

their feelings. So when our children say they hate us, it's hard to keep our heads. What has happened to them happens to us. The light of reason goes out! And what we do next is often determined by what we saw our parents do. You're ahead of the curve, here, because you're able to see various alternatives, and you've reached out for help. That's great! It's better than just blasting back at your child, which only creates a scary situation on top of the situation that sent her mind reeling in the first place.

The way to give yourself a chance at being your child's emotional anchor during an outburst is to find a [Listening Partner](#), set a date to exchange listening, and when it's your turn, do what your daughter is doing. Tell your listener how you feel, what happens that drives you nuts, and what feelings surge through you when she begins her tirade. Tell it all. Let your own feelings spill out. Allow yourself to cry hard and laugh hard whenever possible. It's the crying, the laughter, the tantrums we have that move emotional debris out of our way so we can think under fire. If your listener is a good one, he or she won't tell you what to do. They'll understand that you're giving your feelings a time and a place to bubble up, get heard, and get out of the way.

With some of this help lined up, it will be easier to think what to say. A child who is feeling hatred needs to know these things:

That you are there, and you won't go away.
That you want her life to be good.
That you see that this is hard.
That you are going to stay with her while it's hard.
That no matter how she feels, you care.
That things can get better—today can be a good day.
That you want to be with her, even when she feels her worst.

Children feel hatred as a result of feeling frightened and alone. In early childhood, there's no way to understand a lot of what is going on, and little ones have minimal control of their lives. When we inevitably can't read their minds, and they feel frightened, they try to offload the feelings. If we routinely stop them from crying, thinking that is the nurturing thing to do, it's possible to allow big feelings to fester. This is, very generally, how children become angry with their parents.

Staylistening counters this kind of hurt. Your daughter will become less angry, more playful, and closer to you each time you hang in with her through a tirade. It might take many upsets to drain the feeling that keeps cropping up, but your attention and offer of connection is very powerful. She desperately wants to feel close to you, but she will have to fight you hard and show you how isolated she became, long ago.

If you send her to her room, take away her privileges, give her a lecture about how upset she makes you, or tell her your feelings are hurt, she could begrudgingly return to a bumpy version of her normal state. But those feelings remain in storage, only to pop out again and again. Listening heals the hurt.

Connect, connect, connect.

Staylistening is not for the faint of heart. It takes work to shed our own feelings of hurt so we can keep reaching for an angry child. You probably won't have the presence of mind to Staylisten every time your daughter gets upset. Research shows that the one thing you *don't* want to do is to be indifferent to a child's feelings. That sends a strong "I don't care" message that can be devastating. So Staylisten if you have the slack. Give yourself a Time Out if you begin to lose your emotional bearings. But don't ignore a child's passionate feelings. It's vital that you respond. The times you can listen, and stay until the storm is over, your child will be deeply relieved. You'll see her best self again, and you'll see the deep power of your caring.