



Parenting by Connection

Study Group Leader's Manual

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Launching Your Study Group

Welcome to Hand in Hand's family of people dedicated to putting connection at the center of parenting. We're glad you are interested in building a safe learning environment for parents, and in exploring Parenting by Connection with other parents! We are confident that the guidelines set out below, together with your intelligence, good will, and common sense, will lay the framework for rewarding learning experiences for you and the parents you bring to your group.

This manual is a supplement to Hand in Hand's booklet, Leading a Parent Resource Group, by Patty Wipfler. It will furnish the leader with a specific outline for leading a 6-week Study Group based on *Parenting by Connection*. The curriculum will present the four parent-to-child Listening Tools as well as parent-to-parent listening time. In order to prepare for leading a 6-week study group, the leader should read and be familiar with the information in the following booklets:

- Leading A Parent Resource Group
- Listening Partnerships for Parents
- Listening to Children 7 booklets: How Children's Emotions Work, Special Time, Playlistening, Crying, Tantrums and Indignation, Healing Children's Fears and Reaching for Your Angry Child
- Setting Limits With Young Children

If you would like to have our support and guidance as you lead your first Study Group, you can arrange for consultations by phone with an experienced Hand in Hand Instructor. Consultations are arranged in advance by contacting the Hand in Hand office or online. The fee is \$70 for 30 minutes phone time, the usual duration of a Study Group phone consultation.

You will encourage parents in your group to try out the Listening Tools, one by one, at home within their family. Your group will function best if you require participants to purchase the Listening to Children packet, Setting Limits and Listening Partnerships for Parents, so the information you give is amplified by the reading they do. As they experiment, you will mentor them, and they will learn from one another, as well.

Materials needed for the class include:

- Name tags (made out in advance)
- Sign in sheet (gather addresses, phone #s and e-mails if not already done)
- Timer
- Tissues
- Hand in Hand booklets named above for the participants to purchase

WEEK 1

• **Welcome**

Warmly welcome the participants and allow each of them to introduce themselves to the group (name, names and ages of children and one thing that they appreciate about their child/children). Having parents speak well of their children begins the class with a warm tone. The leader should introduce him- or herself in the same way.

• **Class purpose and outline**

Give the participants a clear idea about what they can expect from the class. Explain that each week parents will have an opportunity to learn a new Listening Tool and tell each other about the experiments they have done. Each parent will also have an opportunity to be listened to by other members of the group.

• **Listening Partnerships**

Invite participants to pair up and exchange listening time for 5 minutes each way, in order to get to know at least one other person better, and to have a chance to practice listening. Prior to beginning the exercise, highlight the importance of listening time where the listener does not give advice or interrupt the speaker. Set this kind of listening apart from everyday listening by explaining some main points about listening time.

- Offer warm regard for your partner and assume they are doing their best
- Do not interrupt or give advice
- Confidentiality is essential within the group
- Do not refer to the content of the speaker's story afterwards, either within or outside the group

After the group has been brought back together, invite people to comment on their experience in the Listening Partnership, either as a listener or as the speaker. Any thought or feeling about their interaction is important, even if it's not a positive one. Respect every person's response and experience, and thank them for voicing it, as this will make listening time easier for people the following week.

• **Leader's Presentation: Overview of *Parenting by Connection***

This is an opportunity to acknowledge how hard parents try. Nobody tries harder to build a close and meaningful relationship with children than their parents. The job of parenting is more difficult than many of us imagined. The feeling that they are never doing enough or that raising children is not what they expected can weigh heavily on parents' ability to see themselves as good parents.

Introduce the *Parenting by Connection* approach. Explain that children are built to be loving, flexible, eager to learn and able to get along well with parents, peers and other adults. The foundation of their ability to function at their best is a strong sense of safety and connection with adults in their world, especially their parents. They expect the best

from their parents and others, and they experience feelings deeply and fully. When children's sense of safety or connection to adults is broken by events as big as a loved one moving away, or as small as being given half a glass of juice instead of a full one, it creates an emotional emergency for a child.

A key insight of *Parenting by Connection* is that children know exactly how to signal that they need help in an emotional emergency, and they also know how to heal from events that have left them with negative feelings. Children signal they need help by engaging in "off track" behavior of many kinds. At these moments, they need both limits and connection from an unruffled (or at least not loudly upset) adult. When the adult offers to come close and connect, the child responds with laughter, tantrums, crying, or trembling, perspiring and struggling, usually while telling or showing the parent what happened and how they feel. It is this full expression of feelings, and the connection the parent offers, that sets a child's mind at ease again, and addresses his core need for connection. The overview that helps to explain our picture of how children's emotions rise and release is described in [How Children's Emotions Work](#).

Overview of the Study Group. The *Parenting by Connection* Study Group will introduce parents to our Listening Tools, which are designed to help parents meet their children's need for connection and tension release. If parents use our tools in the way we direct in our booklets, their children will show them how this emotional release process works to clear children's minds of tension. You will model the two parent-to-parent Listening Tools in your group. In order to be able to lift emotional tension out of our children's lives, we need to be listened to better ourselves. Our job is big and our support systems seldom match our needs.

In the study group, you will present the Listening Tools that are essential for supporting children with connection and closeness. We begin with Special Time.

Special Time. Introduce this Listening Tool as a way to build a special kind of closeness and sense of safety with a child. Although many parents spend a great deal of time with their children, explain that Special Time is different because the child is in charge. The parent announces that Special Time will occur, says how long it will last, and says the child can play or do anything he or she chooses. The main job of the parent in Special Time is to be utterly pleased with their child and to shower him with attention. Recommend that the parent use a timer to determine a start and a finish time for the Special Time. This allows both the parent and the child to have clear expectations about the length of time. Parents may find it challenging to provide undivided attention toward their children. Parents often try to complete many tasks at once. Special Time gives them permission to leave chores undone while playing with their child—no multitasking allowed! An important component of Special Time is that the child is in charge, and gets to use his or her own judgment freely. Using a timer and announcing Special Time put the child in charge of this connecting time with their parent.

Ask parents if they have questions, and clarify that the homework is to do one or two Special Times with their child. The amount of time is less important than the full enthusiasm and attention of the parent during Special Time. You do not need to know the

answers to all the parents' questions. Write down the ones you can't answer, and use consultation to get the information you need.

• Parent Support Group

This is an opportunity for each parent to receive and give listening time within a group setting. The leader will be the up-front listener, moving to sit next to each person as his or her turn arises. Suggest that the participant talk about their earliest parenting experience, either their birth story or the impact of becoming new parent.

A word is necessary here about the physical setting for this part of the group. It's important to have the group in an enclosed space, such as a room with doors closed, or in a corner of a den or living room, with chairs or seating arranged so that no one is left distant from the others, and so that people are in close proximity to each other. Chairs spaced far away, or doors left wide open, or seating outside often sets up an atmosphere in which people can't build a sense of safety. The unconscious impression is that someone might walk through at any moment, or that others don't really want to sit close to them. A makeshift space, such as a children's bedroom, with seating on the floor with bed and wall as back support, or people sitting on the edges of two single beds brought close to each other, is fine. Physical distance is not your friend in creating a sense of emotional safety for your group. However, for this first meeting, if you insist on a cozy arrangement too rigidly, it can make people uncomfortable, so use your good judgment here.

When a parent has talked about something with a good deal of emotional charge, at the end of their turn, offer to ask them a little question that will direct their mind away from the emotional content they've just concentrated on. Examples of such questions are: "What's the last time you rode on a merry-go-round?" "Where do you keep your cheese in your fridge?" "What unmatched socks do you have stashed away?" "What's the most northerly place you've ever visited?" These questions help the person to focus on something that isn't emotionally charged. They help the whole group transition "freshen up" after one parent's story, so they're ready to listen to the next. If you need to, write out some questions like this ahead of time. Don't ask questions that require a sophisticated education to answer, like, "Name three Greek classical dramatists?" A better question in that vein is, "When you think of Greece, what comes to mind?"

Ask a willing participant to be the upfront listener for you. This is a wonderful opportunity to build safety and demonstrate the way in which a safe environment and respectful attention help people shed tensions and feelings they have been carrying.

Again, ask participants to comment on their experience with being listened to in the large group setting, *without mentioning any of the details of what someone else talked about*. Being able to say that it was hard, weird or great will make it a little bit easier for them to return to the group. And thank the participants for taking a risk to try new things!

- **Closing and Appreciation**

Ask parents to offer an appreciation of something they enjoyed about the class. This gives them an opportunity to recollect something they learned or what went well for them. Remind them that they may appreciate another person in the class, but not to comment on that person's listening time story. Ask permission to make a class roster with contact information on it for all participants.

- **Homework**

Offering homework will allow parents to review the information you gave them, and to amplify it.

- Read How Children's Emotions Work
- Read Special Time and try it at least one time with their child
- Read pages 1-20 of Listening Partnerships for Parents

WEEK 2

Equipment:

Same as week one—continue using nametags.
Class roster with contact information.

• Introduction and Warm Up

Welcome everybody back to the class and have each person introduce herself and report on something that went well for them this week. The attention towards the positive in our lives reminds us that we are capable and good people.

• Listening Partnerships

Same as Week 1—these listening exchanges help people debrief and connect well with one other person.

• Group Discussion

Ask several people to report back on Special Time and how it went for them. Appreciate each parent's story regardless of the Special Time outcome. Answer questions about Special Time and assist people to further understand the purpose and procedure for this Listening Tool.

Tip: If parents did Special Time without announcing it to the child (many parents can't bring themselves to announce it at first), point out that if Special Time is announced, it then "belongs" to the child. If not, it "belongs" to the parent, who can change the direction of his attention at any moment, for any reason. Encourage parents to announce Special Time, to use a timer, and to let children look forward to it.

Leader's Presentation: Introduce Staylistening.

Explain that when the collection of hurt feelings and disappointments build up on children, they begin to feel a lack of connection and closeness with others. This feels awful for the child! One final small thing happens, and they are suddenly inflexible and upset. They begin to cry, tantrum or scream. They are actually doing the smartest thing they can possibly do—try to offload the hurt, and heal it at last. Crying heals the hurt. Staylistening allows parents to partner with their children to restore a sense of wellbeing and connection. Explain that after a child has had an opportunity to cry with a caring adult close by, the child's sunny and flexible disposition will be restored. Offer an appropriate example of your own use of Staylistening. Answer any questions about Staylistening. Be honest if you don't know the answer: use the consultation session to clarify any questions that went unanswered.

(Clarify that Staylistening is described in the booklets Crying, Tantrums, Healing Children's Fears, and Listening to Your Angry Child. When those booklets were written, Patty hadn't yet coined the term Staylistening.)

- **Parent Support Group**

The leader will follow the same guidelines as in Week 1 for the support group. The participants can be instructed to talk about their experience with Special Time, their thoughts about Staylistening, how these Listening Tools differ from the way they were treated by their parents, or whatever is going on for them in their lives.

- **Closing and Appreciation**

Same as Week 1

- **Homework**

- Read Crying, and Tantrums and Indignation
- Practice Staylistening at least once
- Complete Listening Partnerships for Parents

WEEK 3

- **Introduction and Warm Up**
- **Listening Partnerships**
- **Group Discussion**

Ask some of the group members to share their experience with Staylistening. Hearing about other parent's successes and attempts with the Listening Tools can be one of the most useful components of the class. Answer further questions about Staylistening, or collect questions to take to consultation.

Leader's Presentation: Introduce Setting Limits.

Explain the importance of setting limits with a child who is demonstrating "off track" behavior, frustrations or disappointments. Offering a child a gentle "no" can be all they need to begin their healing process. Often, it's better to *bring* the limit before you say the limit, as children *can't* process verbal instructions when their upsets have been stirred up. Talk about the "Listen, Limit, Listen" approach. Talk about how helpful it is to *bring* a limit at the first sign of unreasonable behavior, rather than waiting until your child has signaled 20 times, and you are frustrated and upset yourself.

Stress that bringing the limit to a child needs to be followed by Staylistening—listening to the feelings that arise. After the child has had an opportunity to be listened to through a cry or tantrum, the child will be more relaxed, cooperative, and flexible. Offer an example from the booklet or your own experience and answer further questions about Setting Limits.

Tip: It helps if you can model saying "No" without harshness—playful "Na, Na, Naaaa!" or "Come here, little one," with a generous tone, will be helpful.

- **Parent Support Group**
- **Closing and Appreciation**
- **Homework**
 - Read Setting Limits and try doing "Listen, Limit, Listen" at least once.
 - Ask parents if they'd like to try exchanging telephone listening time during the intervening week(s) to cut down on the tension build-up. Invite them to use the contact information on their rosters.

WEEK 4

- **Introduction and Warm Up**
- **Listening Partnerships**
- **Group Discussion**

Ask the group to report back on Setting Limits. Warmly offer support and answer questions. If you don't know an answer, write down the question and, after consultation, you can get back to the parents by e-mail or at the next meeting.

- **Leader's Presentation: Introduce Playlistening.**

Explain parents can grow closer to their child through playfully taking the less powerful role, and promoting laughter. In Playlistening, the child is always mightier, stronger and more clever while the parent plays the less powerful role. The laughter that ensues releases tensions in the child and builds a closer relationship between parent and child. Explain that children adore this kind of play and offer an example of Playlistening from the booklet or your own experience to demonstrate how to follow the laughter in a child.

Tip: It can help parents to ask them what they already do that is like Playlistening. Often, parents have developed games like falling down when their children push them or acting scared when their children say "Boo!" that are good illustrations of Playlistening.

- **Parent Support Group**
- **Closing and Appreciation**
- **Homework**
 - Read [Playlistening](#) and try this Listening Tool at home.

WEEK 5

- **Introduction and Warm Up**

- **Listening Partnerships**

- **Group Discussion**

Ask for parents' experiences using Playlistening, including how the parents felt about their roles as they did it. Continue to support their exploration of the Listening Tools and their development of their understanding of the *Parenting by Connection* approach by answering questions parents have about their pressing issues with their children. By this point, the parents will be building and repairing connections with their children by using a variety of Listening Tools.

- **Leader's Presentation: Introduce restimulation.**

Describe how raising our children can ignite our emotions, which have their source in old hurts and issues from our own childhood. These emotions, including fears, anger, and exhaustion, can make it difficult for parents to enjoy their children fully and listen to them thoroughly. Being able to identify and talk about previous difficulties in our lives helps us to better understand how our relationships with our children can be tinted by emotionally charged events in the past. Offer an example from your own experience to demonstrate the concept of restimulation, and how very specific behaviors elicit very specific reactions from parents that are directly linked to past experiences that still contain emotional charge for the parent.

- **Parent Support Group**

- **Closing and Appreciation**

- **Homework**

- Review Listening Partnerships for Parents and set up a partnership with someone in the study group. Ask each parent to use the roster to arrange a time to exchange listening time.
- Read Healing Children's Fears and Reaching for Your Angry Child.

WEEK 6

Additional materials needed:

One sheet of paper and a pen or pencil for each member, and something to write on.

- **Introduction and Warm Up**
- **Listening Partnerships**
- **Group Discussion**

Ask group members to relate their experience doing a Listening Partnership outside of the group setting. Discuss how Listening Partnerships can benefit parents in their daily lives by giving them opportunities to offload their own tensions. In particular, ask whether parents felt they had offloaded tension by talking, crying, or laughing, and whether they noticed any resulting change in their ability to relate to their children or partners.

Check in on other recent examples of using Listening Tools with children, and appreciate the intelligence and caring with which each parent has approached their child.

Leader's Presentation: Building Support for the Work of Parenting

Our society doesn't support parents in their work as parents: there's no preparation, no pay, no protection from overwhelming circumstances, and no praise. This institutional neglect of vital and skilled work is a big part of what's hard about being a parent. Given this situation, parents need to and can build their own support systems, which include help, good information, and a way to offload the emotional tension that collects when you love your children so much and have too little support. Listening Partnerships and groups like this one are designed to help meet parents' needs for support, caring, acknowledgment, and good information.

Here, it's good to let people know whether or not you're planning on continuing the group, and if so, warmly invite them to continue with you.

- **Parent Support Group**
- **Closing and Appreciation**

Ask parents to summarize what has changed for them as a result of this group, and whether they would like to continue meeting. Ask them to write something about what has been valuable about this Study Group, and to include any anecdotes they think are illustrative of what they have learned. If parents are willing to have their stories quoted by Hand in Hand, please ask them to write their names and e-mail addresses or telephone numbers on their evaluation sheets. Please send these responses to admin@handinhandparenting.org or Hand in Hand, 555 Waverley Street, Palo Alto, CA 94301.

Subsequent Meetings

We hope that the parents in your group will want to continue supporting each other in their efforts to use *Parenting by Connection* Listening Tools in their families. We recommend that you invite people to commit to coming back to the group for a set of times, say 4 or 6 more meetings, rather than running it as a drop-in group. If you leave it loose, parents will find it harder to fight the many pressures of life to win some listening time for themselves.

As leader, it will work best if you propose an idea of how to focus each set of meetings you agree upon, ask for participants' input, and win agreement on a direction for the group. Here are some workable ideas for the focus of Study Groups.

- **Focus on Special Time.** Each parent commits to doing Special Time at least once with each child between meetings. At each meeting parents take turns reporting on what their child did with Special Time, how it was for them, and how their relationship with their child is progressing. Support Group Time is then focused on working through feelings that get in the way of showing delight during Special Time, and/or of using the other Listening Tools.
- **Focus on Review of Each Listening Tool.** Each week, parents discuss how they used one of the Listening Tools, and are asked to reread one of the Listening to Children booklets. We find that parents discover new ideas when they reread the material, after having worked with their children for a few weeks. Some concepts become clearer, and others are reinforced.
- **Focus on Building Support.** Each week, parents focus on working through the feelings they experience as they work to build more help, more listening time, and more play into their lives. Parents commit to doing Listening Partnerships with each other either by phone or in person.
- **Focus on Community Leadership.** Each week, parents focus on their efforts to build relationships with family members, friends, school staff, and people in other organizations that impact their lives, with the goal of making their environment better for themselves and their children.
- **Focus on telling life stories.** It can be a deeply moving and bonding experience to make room on a regular basis for each parent to begin at the beginning of what they remember about their lives, and to tell their stories, week by week, with plenty of permission to express and release feelings as their story unfolds.

We hope that these ideas for further work together will appeal to you and your group, or spur your own thinking about what would work best for you. It's your group. Enjoy!