



## A Good Cry Can Promote Secure Attachment

by Patty Wipfler

Most of us parents want, more than anything, for our presence to be the elixir that banishes our children's upsets. We want our touch, our cuddles, and our sweet words to heal the hurt.

Our son cries over a stomped-on paper airplane, and we put an arm around him and tell him we will make another. He snuffles and slowly comes around.

Or our daughter tantrums over a balloon that floated away and can't be caught, and we gather her up, wriggling in protest, and talk her down until she's quiet, if not exactly sunny.

Or neither child wants to sleep in their own bed, so we lie down next to them, one after the other, night after night, glad that we can keep their tears away, but wishing we could get an hour to ourselves instead!

We know that children need to feel securely attached to their parents in order to thrive. We come to them, as we should, when they're upset. We bring our touch, our words, our soothing ways, and sometimes, a distraction or two to help them along. We want to protect them from adversity.

*A difficult moment can break your child's sense of connection with you.*

But if you carefully observe the child you've just cuddled or shushed, you'll see that there's an extended period of emotional cloudiness after you intercede to divert her emotions. She's not ready to play. The lost balloon or the smashed paper airplane lingers in her mind. And after 6 more months of lying down with your children at night, they still can't go to sleep by themselves. Bravery doesn't seem to be arriving any time soon.

That's because every day, little things break your child's sense of security. The hurt she feels crowds out her sense of connection to you. When she's upset, she feels, among other things, alone. And quite vulnerable.

Sometimes, a little incident can trigger feelings your child has harbored from earlier hard times. When her little brother steps on her paper airplane, she's enraged. She feels the heat of resentments from those weeks and months after he was born. She's got a

backlog of emotions that are hard to manage. Feelings unexpressed become feelings that erode her sense of connection at random times during the next hours and days.

### *Soothing your child can't address the stored feelings the child carries.*

You see, shushing or distracting your child can communicate, “I don’t think you can handle these feelings you’re having.” It says, “I feel so badly. I don’t want you to have to go through this.” Stopping your child’s cry or tantrum inhibits a natural healing process—crying, tantrums, perspiring and sweating, and laughter—that rids your child’s mind of negative emotion. Without the benefit of a full-on emotional episode, low-level negativity will infect her functioning for a while. She’ll continue to feel vulnerable. She’ll dwell on what happened, unable to play well.

### *Listening, instead of shushing, changes everything!*

When you let your child express her feelings, listening to her attentively, you help her recover from adversity, instead of helping her avoid how adversity feels. You help her grow in confidence.

Yes, she needs your love, offered through the kindness in your eyes, your steady voice, and perhaps through touch, though children in a tantrum benefit more from a small bit of space so they are free to flail. You can tell her you care every few minutes. You’ll see that your child will probably cry harder when you speak kindly, but not too often. When she feels your support, it speeds the healing process. It intensifies her feelings, and she offloads them faster.

If you keep paying attention, she’ll show you her passionate emotions, and deconstruct the feel of adversity, until she doesn’t feel it any longer. When she’s done, she’ll be bright and ready to move on, undaunted.

If the hurt is big—grandpa moved away, or her favorite teacher is out sick and she doesn’t want to go to school—several good cries might be needed to drain the pool of feelings there, and restore your child’s confidence. But with every tenderly supported cry, she learns that she can handle hard times. And she learns that you’ll support her while she grapples with unfavorable events.

### *Don't fix, and don't soothe.*

When you come to her, don’t get busy fixing the situation. Yes, you could fold another paper airplane in a minute flat, but *her feelings* are the issue now. There’s emotional recovery to be done! There’s adversity to be faced and surmounted. A new paper airplane misses the point. It leaves her with backed-up disappointment that will spill out again the very next time her little brother does something unexpected. You’ll see it in

her mounting tension every time he approaches one of her toys. She's not over it. She didn't finish her cry.

And yes, you could fold her in your arms and rock her so she quiets down, but the unresolved feelings that don't get expressed will clutter her life with little fears, irritations, and pickiness. They'll crop up because it's hard to carry stored feelings around. They foul a child's behavior. They interfere with fun and closeness.

*Pay attention and care, while your child does the work of healing.*

So instead, trust that **your kind attention is a powerful healing force**. Trust that if you listen with love, she'll feel it.

Help her notice what happened. "Tony didn't mean to crush your airplane." Or, "Shall I pick it up so you can look it over?" Or, "It's hard to see it smooshed." Don't tell her about *your* feelings. If you say, "Oh, that Tony! I wish I could have kept him from doing this!" you're undermining her ability to step up to what happened and work her feelings through. You're saying, "I am upset about this," and piling *your* upset on top of *her* upset.

*You'll need a listener too, but tell your reactions to an adult.*

You do need to be listened to, of course, just as she does, when hard things happen. We parents have outsized feelings about the adversity our children face. We wish their lives could be perfect, and when they get upset, it triggers big upsets for us. Building a [Listening Partnership](#) will help you figure out how to exchange listening time with another parent, so you can work through your own feelings from adverse events, and reclaim your joy in parenting.

*When feelings arise, there are two complimentary jobs.*

When your child has an upset, she's got a job to do. Her job is to offload the emotion that's churning inside her. You can't shush it away, or reason it away. Only your child can dissolve her hurt feelings. Fortunately, she was built to dissolve big feelings. She will cry, have a tantrum, tremble, perspire, or wail. Laughter has a deeply healing effect, too. Children are experts at ridding themselves of upset. They don't mince around. They go for the gold!

Support and caring is *your* job, and you can do that excellently. Listen. Simply listen. Offer your full attention. Let go of your agenda, your plans, and your worries. Lend your child confidence while she feels badly done to. Do all you can to understand how hard this moment is for her. Offer her respect, as though she were giving a recital or reading you a poem about her deepest feelings. Her cries are coming from the depth of her

being. Receive it all. Your steady offer of connection will seep in, replacing her negative feelings as they pour out. However undone she seems at the moment, she'll come away stronger for having swept all that out of her system, under your caring protection.

*When you listen, you empower your child.*

Your listening can reverse your child's emotional dings and dents. It can restore her sense of security. Listening to your child makes you her steady partner in the business of healing from hurt, then moving forward together.

### **Here's how it can work:**

*I am a single mom and have been raising my five-year-old son by myself since he was close to three years old. We are extremely connected and have never spent time far from one another, aside from my typical eight-hour day at work, of course.*

*Well, the opportunity arose for him to go camping for the weekend with some friends in Eureka, five hours north of our home. He was extremely excited about the idea, as was I, for I needed time to rest and rejuvenate. A few days before he was set to leave I was reading him our usual bedtime story when he began asking me questions about the trip. "How long will I be gone, mama," he asked. "Two days and two nights," I replied. "That is too long! Can't you go with me?" he asked, with a hint of desperation in his voice. I could feel it coming—he wanted to back out. His fears about leaving me and being far away were surfacing.*

*"No, sweetie, I can't go, you are going by yourself and you will be just fine." I kept my reply calm. "No! Do I have to go? What if one of the other boys pushes me off a cliff?" His eyes turned desperate and I could see that his big fears were coming whether I liked it or not.*

*"Yes, sweetheart, you have to go. You will be fine and safe. There are no cliffs there, only water and trees. You will have fun," I replied. "No!!!!!!!! Please don't make me go! Don't leave me! You want me to leave!!!" He was starting to cry hard, and had me in a headlock to keep me close.*

*"No, sweetie, I don't want you to leave, I love you with me. But this will be so fun and you will be back with mama in two days. I will think of you every day. It is OK to feel worried." He cried for a bit longer and then floated off into a deep sleep.*

*The next morning he woke up fresh and alive. "Mama! I'm going camping! I'm going to have so much fun and will only be gone for a medium time!" He was light and happy. Working on his fears safely really helped him prepare himself to go. When the day came he hugged me goodbye, jumped in our friend's car, and was off to Eureka.*

--A Parenting by Connection mom in Oakland, CA