

listening to children

SPECIAL TIME



by Patty Wipfler

 hand in hand

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Building a Closer Connection

We parents love our children! Our love for them is often the most deeply felt emotion we have ever experienced. We may not always find it easy to express this love, but it is certainly a powerful force in our lives! The times when we can relax, play and connect with our children are at the heart of our precious relationship with them. But relaxed time for parent and child to share their love is always in short supply. Both parents and children long for more.

Parents are not at fault for this short supply of easy time. In our society, the work of parenting is sadly undervalued and poorly understood. Most parents plan for warmth and closeness within their families, but find themselves saddled with enough responsibility to occupy three full-time people. Overwork separates us from our children. We patch our family life together with full hearts, but with few tools and very little help. Long range, a major task of our society will be to provide mothers and fathers with the tools and help they need to support the important work they do as parents. We should aim to make it possible for parents to enjoy their children and their parenthood without constant worries about survival.

The practice of giving Special Time to your child is an excellent tool for parenting in difficult times. It is a simple yet powerful way of building and strengthening close relationships with our children. It can also be an antidote to those feelings of not being a good enough parent that plague us and spoil our enthusiasm. When we make the time to fully concentrate on our relationships with our children, we satisfy some of the deep needs for loving and being close that are natural to people of every age. We begin to take fuller pride in our parenting. Our children thrive on our growing confidence as parents, and on the attention we give them.

Giving your child Special Time is an active form of listening, in which your child's play becomes her vehicle for telling you about her life and perceptions. To begin, you focus your entire attention on your child. This is not casual play or indirect contact! Decide to notice everything about your child's words, expression, tone of voice, posture and movement. Absorb information through your every pore, as if your child were entirely new to you. Here are further guidelines for setting up Special Time:

- Set aside a short, defined period of time, during which there will be no interruptions at all: no telephone, no doorbell, no siblings to be tended, no cups of tea to be made, no need for you to do anything except be with your child. We recommend using a timer to show that you will protect this time between you.
- Do what you can to be free of worries and fatigue. Choose a time when you are able to take a deep breath, leave the dishes in the sink, and spend time enjoying the remarkable child you have brought into your family.
- During Special Time, put your child in charge of her relationship with you. Let your child know that, for this time period, you are willing to do anything she wants. Follow her lead, whether she tells you or simply shows you what she wants to do. This reversal of the usual balance of power between you will encourage your child to bring up thoughts and feelings she cannot entrust to you in the everyday bustle of family life.
- Let her know you are enjoying her thoroughly. Let your affection, interest and approval show on your face, in your voice, and through your touch. Your child may seem to ignore your added warmth, but don't stop and wait for gratitude or a return of your affection. Your child will absorb your caring, and will decide how to use it in her own time and way.
- Expect new things to happen. Your tone of expectation and interest will help your child make use of this opportunity to show you new things about herself.
- Don't give in to the temptation to direct the play with your own ideas, or to teach how it could be done better. Your child needs many opportunities to use her own judgment and to experiment freely. The modifications to play that you suggest will keep you from fully understanding her ideas, her preferences and her enthusiasms. Modify the play only if what your child suggests is clearly unsafe.

As You Listen, Your Child's Trust in You Will Build

When you give your child Special Time on a regular basis, she'll build a deeper trust in you. She will show you more of herself, how she sees the world and how she feels. You will probably see some of the following developments (not necessarily in this order), which will indicate that your child is feeling safer with you.

- **You may be tested.** Your child may choose to do the kind of play you find most boring or most irritating, to see if you really will be delighted with her no matter what. This may mean that you will be asked to learn to roller skate, or to play video games, or to splash lots of water in the kitchen sink. It may help to talk with a good listener about what you don't like about the play your child chooses, to ease your own tensions. When you can be enthusiastic about your child's choice of play during Special Time, trust will increase rapidly.
- **Your child may explore new activities or new territory.** A child will often decide to use the safety of adult attention to test her physical limits by jumping on beds in every possible way, or walking down the block farther than ever before, or putting every possible item, including herself, into a large mud puddle. She will use your permission and approval to do intensive, whole-bodied learning.
- **Your child will show you issues of importance.** Your open enjoyment and relaxed attitude will sooner or later lead your child to try to face the issues that challenge her. For instance, if your child has recently been given a painful shot at the doctor's office, you may find yourself the recipient of vigorous shots gleefully given during Special Time. Or if a teacher has scolded her, she may play "teacher" and scold you with the same words and tone. She is communicating to you about an issue of importance. Your offer to listen to her has been energetically accepted.
- **Your child will bring up a wide variety of issues.** The safety of Special Time will give your child permission to show you details of her thinking and difficulties around power, violence, medical treatment, physical pain, her body, separation, eating, a collection of occasional fears, and more. She will use listening time from you to work out her tensions surrounding these issues through play, talk

and outbursts of feelings.

- **Your child may show an increasing attachment to you.** Your child will discover that having Special Time with you is deeply reassuring. You will notice positive changes in her: increased affection, hopefulness, excitement about life, sharing of thoughts and accomplishments. Your child notices these changes too, and will want more of your attention to help her feel good about herself. Her bids for your attention may become more frequent throughout the day. She may feel safe enough to show you feelings of dependency or nameless fears that have lingered from infancy, such as being afraid of the dark again. This may look like a regression to more immature behavior, and will probably be quite irritating to you at first. In actuality, this is progress. Your child has used the trust built during Special Time to dare to show you troubles she has been carrying alone. She is now able to ask for your help to resolve these important issues.

- **Old difficulties that you thought your child had resolved are likely to reappear.**

When children try to show their difficulties to their parents and are distracted, ignored, reprimanded, or isolated, they eventually give up trying to get help, and adopt some repetitive behavior or ritual to keep themselves from feeling so bad on difficult occasions. Given increased safety in your relationship, your child may decide to get your listening help with this unfinished business. She will not confine her requests for listening time to Special Time, but will simply begin to complain, have a tantrum, or cry when things upset her. From your child's point of view, she feels sure of your acceptance, so she simply can't hold in her bad feelings any longer.

The Playlistening Response to Children's Issues

One of the basic keys to listening thoroughly and attentively to a child is an active way of responding that is quite different from what we think of as ordinary play. Playlistening is a kind of listening in which you demonstrate your willingness to see what your child thinks and feels by clearly giving him the powerful role in play. When you take the smaller, weaker, less competent role, your child feels

confident enough to show you his thoughts and feelings around important issues. As listener, you look for opportunities to help your child resolve his tensions around a particular issue through laughter as you play.

Let's use the example of the child who wants to give Mommy a shot (having been given one recently himself). He has shown Mommy the issue. If Mommy, putting aside her usual composure, can playfully squirm and try to get away, or yelp and tell the child in exaggerated panic, "No! No shot, please," the child can laugh and persist in doing to Mommy what he feels was done to him. A creative adult can help a child laugh long and hard during a playtime the child will not soon forget.

This playful role reversal lets the child continue to be in charge of the relationship. He decides how he wants to unfold his feelings and perceptions around the issue. His laughter dissolves significant tensions: a child can continue to laugh for half an hour or longer, if the adult can keep playing that long. A game that begins with lots of laughter around giving shots to Mommy, who tries in vain to get away, might later turn into making loud noises at Mommy, who jumps in exaggerated fear, and then might gradually move toward throwing a pillow at Mommy to make her fall down every time she struggles to her hands and knees, all with much laughter and glee.

To begin Playlistening, notice what allows your child to laugh, and do more of whatever that may be. A good playlistener will act helpless enough to be non-threatening, but active enough to be interesting. He will keep his attention on what the child shows about the issue. For example, if your child wants you to chase him, don't assume that you should chase him as a monster. (We adults have the strong tendency to change the entire subject of a child's play to fit our own ideas.) If a chase is called for, simply chase your child with noisy effort but little success. You might catch his shirttail for a moment, or you might succeed in tackling him (look for what brings the most laughter), but he always gets away in the end. On the other hand, if your child says he wants you to be a monster, play a befuddled, stumbling, incompetent monster, not a large and threatening one.

When a child is very small, adults need to play a very helpless role to allow him to laugh. As a child grows in strength and self-assurance, he needs fuller resistance and more of a contest to keep the laughter rolling. A child will screech frantically if you are being too forceful in play, because his fears have made him unsure of your good intentions. Slow down and become less competent if your child is screeching rather than laughing, so he can regain the initiative. He needs to feel fully safe and in charge in order to release tension on an issue through laughter.

Another caution: don't tickle. Tickling is a form of unaware touching which can easily victimize children.

Parents sometimes worry that if they playfully take the less powerful role, their child will lose respect for them. This worry is unfounded. However, your child will become thrilled with the opportunity to show you his issues and struggles in this painless way, and will probably want far more Playlistening than you feel prepared to do. After a playtime with lots of laughter, your child may be obviously affectionate, close, and relaxed. Sometimes, deeper feelings will flow more freely. Tiny difficulties can easily bring on a long, hearty cry after a playtime full of laughter. The play and laughter have thoroughly reassured your child. Now he is letting you know the more painful feelings he carries.

Playing actively and attentively with children doesn't come easily to most of us. Generally, our parents were working too hard and under too many pressures to play this way when we were children. We have not had much exposure to adults who can set aside their worries and play actively without having to dominate. If Playlistening is difficult for you, try to find someone to listen while you talk about why it's so hard. Taking time to talk about the irritations and worries that prevent you from playing will help you keep experimenting despite your discomfort.

Listening to a Child's Deeper Feelings

Both adults and children search for friendships that offer the safety to allow feelings to accompany the thoughts we express. Our closest relationships are usually with people who love us enough to let us show how we feel, without hurrying us toward composure. Children show deep feelings easily: tantrums in frustration, the perspiration and trembling that accompany fear, and lots of crying when there is sadness. It is common for children of parents who listen well to cry and rage frequently during their childhood, as part of a natural process of clearing away tension and confusion. A child's fear and grief are like unwanted baggage: these feelings require much of a child's attention if they must be managed and carried along. But if the child can fully reveal and unload them, he is free to be his loving, confident, cooperative self again.

It is very useful to a child to be allowed to continue showing feelings until the feelings subside. Our typical reaction to our child's show of feelings is to do something quick to help him regain his composure. We adults worry that the child has plunged into irrationality and might never recover a balanced perspective. In fact, the opposite is true: showing feelings will dependably improve a child's perspective and confidence when a listener provides basic caring, reassurance and respect.

When tears or tantrums begin, it is important that a parent gently continue to listen, thoughtfully staying near the child, touching him or holding him gently and saying a few words of caring. For example, "Tell me more," "I love you," "I'm sorry it happened that way." If you say too much, you'll dominate the interaction, and you won't be listening any more. Your child will feel deeply cared about if you are able to listen to how he feels without trying to correct his feelings. When a child has stormed or cried the feelings through, he will begin to notice you and his surroundings again, and will generally feel deeply relieved and refreshed. Light laughter or yawns will often follow a stormy cry, indicating that a child has done almost enough emotional release to begin to relax and think well at last.

When a child feels tense or isolated, he may set up a situation so that an adult will have to set limits on his behavior. Once reasonable limits have been set, the child takes the opportunity to cry or rage, and can release the tension he has been feeling. If allowed to work out his upset with some reassurance and good listening, the child will emerge from the outburst relaxed, relieved, warm, aware and reasonable, accepting of the limits that were set. However, if there is a large backlog of tension, anger or mistrust, your child may need to cry or rage extensively several times before he is able to clear away enough emotional debris to remember that he is loved and cherished.

Many parents find that listening to a child's tears or tantrums, without putting demands on him to pull himself together, is actually much easier and more rewarding than trying to control, distract, or force polite behaviors upon him. Times of tears and rage are times which you can very effectively communicate your love for your child, who feels that his world has fallen apart. When you stay close, without demands, he can put his world back together in his own good time, with your caring as an active part of the picture. He will feel deeply loved when you have continued to show that you care through the worst of his feelings.

Giving your child regular Special Time will start you on the path of respecting your child's judgment, and listening to the tensions and feelings he is eager to shed. This kind of listening is at first extremely difficult for almost all parents!

Most of us didn't receive the kind of care and listening we are learning to give. In this uncharted territory, we are bound to feel uncomfortable at times. But our children's response can be our guide. Every time we listen well through their tears, every time a Special Time is full of exploration or laughter, they'll show us that we're strengthening the bonds of love and trust we want to build with them.

Our Mission

Hand in Hand improves the lives of parents and children by nurturing the parent-child connection. To learn more about the Parenting by Connection approach and Listening Tools for parents and professionals, contact:

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Literature List

The Listening Tools employed in the Parenting by Connection approach are fully described in the following Hand in Hand literature:

Items marked * are available in Spanish

Booklets

- * Parenting by Connection
- * Listening: A Tool for Caring Parents
- * Listening to Children: Seven-bookletset includes: How Children's Emotions Work, Special Time, Playlistening, Crying, Tantrums and Indignation, Healing Children's Fears, and Reaching for Your Angry Child (also available in Chinese and Japanese)
- * Setting Limits with Children
- * Supporting Adolescents
- * Listening to Parents: Listening Partnerships for Parents
- * Listening to Parents: Leading a Parent Resource Group

Audio

Listening to Children: Audio version of the six-booklet set above (on CD)

- * Cómo Fijar Límites a Nuestros Niños: Spanish audio version of Setting Limits with Children (on audiotape)

Videotapes

Setting Limits with Children, 61 minutes

Playlistening, 39 minutes

All are by Patty Wipfler, and can be purchased online
at www.handinhandparenting.org
or by calling Hand in Hand at 650 322-5323.

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