

listening to children

HEALING CHILDREN'S FEARS



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 hand in hand

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Where Do Children's Fears Come From?

Children are born into the world knowing very little about how it works, and they arrive expecting love, gentleness and understanding. While parents provide as much love and attention as they can, one or two adults aren't always able to provide all the attention and tenderness a young child expects. When things happen that children don't comprehend, or when they are left alone too much, they can easily become frightened. Many experiences that seem harmless and matter-of-fact to grownups can frighten a child, who is keenly tuned to sense tensions we take for granted. In particular, our children are unprepared for sudden, painful or thoughtless occurrences. Early separation from mother or father, sudden, unexplained changes in who cares for her, tense conversations within the family, teasing by aggressive relatives, or exposure to violence on TV are the kinds of things that can frighten a child, even though nothing physically harmful has happened.

In addition, some children face direct physical trauma very early in life. A long or difficult birth, being born prematurely, treatment for jaundice, even circumcision can frighten an infant and diminish the blessings of peace and ease during the first months of life. Some children, because of serious trauma, lead lives that are always tense with underlying fear.

When a child feels frightened, she has difficulty staying in close contact with her loved ones. She can't hold your gaze for long, and will either be slow to experiment and to trust people, or will be constantly on the go, unable to slow down and enjoy your presence in a relaxed way. Fear also makes children edgy and hard to please: things have to be "just so" or the frightened child flares with impatience or anger. Life does not roll easily from one sunny pastime to the next for the young child who is afraid.

Sometimes, you'll be called upon to help your child recover from her fears just after the fright has occurred. For example, a bounding dog has just been pulled away from your child, who is standing unhurt but terrified and screaming. More frequently, your child will come to you with a fear she has had for some time. Nothing real threatens her, but fear grips her just the same. The child who was once frightened by a bounding dog is seized by that same fear when invited to touch a dozing classroom rabbit. A child who has always been afraid of meeting new people is panicked again on the first day of first grade.

How Children Recover from their Fears

We parents can help our children recover completely from their fears. Few of us have seen more than a moment or two of the recovery process our children try to use. It is a difficult one for parents to support, because when children are shedding fear, they feel deeply afraid. Children shed their fears as they tremble, cry loudly without tears, perspire, and have active kidneys. Children need us to come close and listen through their fears, just as they need us to come close and listen when they cry. While children recover from grief they feel utterly sad, as though the heartbreak will never end. Similarly, as you move closer to your fearful child her fears will become more intense. She may struggle against you as she trembles and perspires. Messy and noisy though it may be, this process is very efficient.

Over time, a fussy, timid or belligerent child will transform her whole demeanor and approach to life if given the chance to shed the fears she carries. By listening to panic and frantic fear, you can clear important stumbling blocks from your child's life. You can help her reclaim the confidence her fears have pirated away.

Your child has probably made repeated attempts to use this recovery process to shed her fears. Frightened infants will try to recover by screaming loudly with their eyes shut tight, their little chins trembling. They move vigorously, perspire and tremble as they scream, often pushing with their legs or pulling at their ears. After infancy, children screech and run to cling to an adult they trust the moment something frightens them. If allowed, they will tremble, struggle, perspire and scream as the adult holds them close and patiently asks what happened.

Seeing a child feel fear during this recovery process is disturbing for most parents: the healing process frightens us, so we do everything in our power to stop it. We soothe, we distract, we scold. We stop the healing process because we equate stopping the child from showing her fear with eliminating the fear. Nothing could be farther from the truth. The child stops, and retains her fear.

If she can't finish crying and trembling the fear away, she can't emerge to face what she was so afraid of and understand that she survived. Her behavior will be governed by that unresolved fear at times that do not always seem to relate to the fearful incident. She might wake up repeatedly with nightmares, or avoid certain activities that scare her. When one of my sons became afraid to part with me at the age of thirteen months, he stopped walking with me to the park. He insisted on being carried. If I put him down and asked him to walk, he would scream, perspire, and dive for my arms in fear. I didn't understand at the time that he needed to feel the fear and expel it, so he could get on with his quest for independence. Children's attempts to work on fear are very confusing: who would guess that letting them be overcome with fear in your arms could cut a straight path toward confidence?

Children Often Show Their Fears Indirectly

Sometimes, children can't initiate this healing process in a straightforward way. They can't scream and run for help, because they have become afraid to feel afraid. Instead, they ask for help by pointedly going off track. Either they insist on avoiding certain activities, people or places, or they act aggressively in situations that frighten them. It is also common for children's fears to surface indirectly in the form of anger. (See *Reaching for Your Angry Child*, published by **Hand in Hand**.)

The following are a few guidelines for assisting a child to recover from fear. They will give you the basic information you need once your child has cried out in her fear and you have arrived to help. Information on how you can assist children who show their fears indirectly, through avoidance or aggression, will follow, after the basic recovery process is outlined here.

- **Hold your child close, and be sure that she can see you fully when she chooses.**

A terrified child needs you close. She needs to feel your body right next to hers, and she needs to see your calm, caring face whenever she opens her eyes. She is reliving a frightening time, and when she looks out at you, she is checking to make sure that you aren't swept away by her fear, too. Do what you can to show confidence that all is well. She needs you to be the steady counterbalance to the panic she is trying to expel. While working through fear, a child you are holding in your arms will sometimes scream and arch her back, throwing her head back with her eyes shut tight. Gently but persistently draw her toward you again and encourage her to look at you. Tell her that you will stay close, and that she can see you anytime she is ready.

- **Stay close, even if your child struggles to fight you off.**

Your child's fear must have a focus in order for the healing process to work. You will often be the safest, most reliable focus he can find. So as you move close to try to help, your child may begin to push you away, transferring her feelings of fear onto you. She will suddenly feel that closeness to you is terrifying, and that you are putting her in mortal danger by staying with her. Her fear, which was acquired in some previous frightening incident, attaches to you because your child can't do battle against abstract ghosts of the past. She does battle against you. You are close enough, safe enough, dedicated enough to stand by her while she fights against whatever force once frightened her into submission. If you allow her to struggle, cry and tremble, without responding in anger, you speed her recovery from that terror.

This is a very tricky situation to handle. On the one hand, we must not overpower or manipulate our children. When we unilaterally force them to do our bidding with our superior size and strength, we do real damage to them. On the other hand, a child does not heal from fear unless a safe, aware adult stays close enough to allow the child to feel afraid as she perspires, cries and trembles fear away. While we are learning to listen to fear, it's best to proceed a small step at a time. When your child begins to feel afraid, move gently to embrace her. If she screams and runs away, approach her again, slowly and reassuringly. At some point, she will start to scream, tremble, and perhaps lash out angrily at you. Contrary to all appearances, at this point, you can be pleased. The healing process has begun. You need not move closer quickly: you have reached a good balance between offering closeness and listening to her fears.

- **Let your child know why you are staying close to her.**

Your child will ardently wish that she didn't have to feel her fears. In order to indicate to her that you are actually thinking about her, rather than simply making her life harder, you will need to tell her now and again why you are staying close. The more fully you can speak your own mind, the more she'll be able to trust you. So, why are you staying close? You are staying close because you want to stay close to her when she's afraid. You stay because you want her to know she's not in danger. You stay because you want to keep her safe. You love her and won't leave her to feel afraid by herself. You'll think of your own reasons as you learn to trust this process of healing fear. Your reassurances won't stop your child from feeling afraid. They will begin to make sense to her after she has unloaded enough fear to realize that she is safe in your arms.

- **If your child is struggling against you, protect yourself from harm.**

As your child struggles with feelings of helplessness and terror, don't expect her to be polite or nice. She can't be. She depends on you to realize that she is fighting her fears, not intentionally

insulting you. In her fear, a child will fight vigorously; if you remain caring, she will tremble, perspire and struggle for quite some time. Try to find ways to reach out and embrace her, while protecting yourself from her frantic motions. If she moves to hit, meet her arms with a shielding hand, or bend so that her fists land on your back or shoulders, where no harm can come to you. If she is kicking, you might want to bring her gently into your lap and remove her shoes, so her feet hit the carpet and not you. By permitting this struggle, you allow your child to powerfully vanquish feelings of helplessness. And by protecting yourself, you ensure that she won't feel guilty about this necessary struggle. You give her the chance to safely fight her way through a scary time, rather than whine, feel victimized or retreat into passivity.

A child who has faced terrifying situations will fight with what looks like fierce determination to hurt the safe person helping her. It is possible to develop the ability to listen and be tender while at the same time quickly and firmly keeping yourself safe. If a child is trying to pull hair or scratch, you will need to hold her hands gently but firmly away from your face, letting her know that you will hold her hands only as long as she is trying to hurt you. She can continue to work through her fears, struggling in a safe way against whatever loose confines she makes necessary.

- **Reassure your child that she is safe now.**

As they shed their fear, children often re-experience some of the physical

aspects of the incident that terrified them. Children who had breathing difficulties at birth often feel like they can't breathe again; indeed, they may begin to cough and become congested for a time. Children who suffered early injury or surgery might feel that your touch is unbearably painful; children who were threatened by an adult or sibling will feel sure that you are mad at them and ready to hurt them. Relaxed, frequent verbal reassurance helps a child as she works through fear. For instance, perhaps your child becomes afraid that she can't breathe, and later, afraid because her body is so hot. (In this healing process, children put out great amounts of body heat.) You might say in a steady voice, "I'm right here by your side. You can breathe just fine. I'm watching every breath, and I'll make sure you don't stop breathing. I won't leave you to fight this alone. I'm watching every minute to be sure you're OK. It's just me holding you. You're hot, but you're OK. You'll cool down later. I'm going to put my hand on your head to help cool you down. Whatever scared you is over now. Nothing can hurt you with me here by your side." Your tone of voice is important. Your words are a steadying force, but a calm, confident tone carries far more reassurance than the words themselves.

Don't expect your reassuring words to soothe your child. Once she has plunged into working on her fears, your words and tone signal to your child that you aren't afraid. This will make it safe for her to continue to work. The more confidence you express, the more panicked she can feel. If your reassurances accurately address the incident the child is working on, she will cry and tremble intensely.

For example, one two-year-old I know tripped and fell over a toy. When his mother came to his side, he began fighting her with loud cries and eyes shut tight. She told him she would stay with him, and talked to him in a reassuring way. He grew more fearful, active, and loud. He began kicking and screaming "Pick me up! Pick me up!" His mother picked him up and held him in her lap. He kept screaming for her to pick him up, perspiring, and pumping his legs up and down in her lap with his eyes shut tight. He was wild with feelings. After five or ten minutes of this, it occurred to the mother that six months ago, his forehead had been cut in a fall, and although she was with him when the doctor stitched him up, he had been strapped down for the procedure. She said to him "I'm sorry I couldn't pick you up in the hospital. I wanted to pick you up. I've got you now, and you're safe. I'm sorry, sweetheart." His eyes flew open, he looked directly at her, and then clung to her tightly, trembling and sobbing intensely as she repeated her apology for another fifteen minutes. Her accurate reassurances let him work deeply to erase his fear.

- **Gradually move toward embracing your child.**

Your child will need you to gradually and thoughtfully move toward a full embrace. You need move closer only a bit at a time, saying what you are going to do before you do it. "I'm going to put my hand on your forehead now, love. I know you're scared, but it's just my hand." Sometimes, as you say what you are going to do, a child becomes intensely afraid of the simple movement you propose. When the mere thought of you moving closer helps her struggle and perspire, keep telling her what you want to do, but do it ever so gradually. You might take ten minutes to actually touch her forehead, holding your hand where she can see it while she trembles and cries as if it were a terrible threat. It is very useful to a child to have this kind of safe pretext as a focus for her fears.

The longer your child struggles, trembles, cries and perspires, the clearer it will become that she is working through past fears. She won't tell you "Oh, now I get it! I'm safe in your arms and I'm remembering when I was born and I couldn't breathe at first!" But her attention as she struggles against you will gradually shift from fear of you to the feelings she had in the incident she is working through. She will progress from saying "You're awful, and I want you to get away from me" toward "I can't breathe, Daddy, I'm not getting any air! Oh, help! I'm not breathing at all!" (Meanwhile, she takes in fine large breaths.) "I can't get my breath! Help me! Oh, I'm scared!" While remembering this fearful time, she'll need you with her, body to body.

Often, at the end of a significant piece of work on fear, a child will make a transition from feeling fear to feeling relief and closeness to you. She will relax in your arms and sob fully as she realizes that you have been through her worst feelings with her. Hold her tenderly. She is feeling close to you, relieved and deeply understood. It is a significant time in her relationship with you.

After working through fears, children need time to rearrange their perceptions of the world again. It looks and feels like a different place, now that there is less to fear. You will see your child quietly watching, listening and touching with a new awareness. She may just want to look at you and touch your face for several minutes, or she may fall into a deep sleep in your arms after a relaxed cry and some yawns.

- **If at any point you become afraid or angry, stop trying to assist your child.**

It is important that we try to help our children with their fears only when we are reasonable ourselves. When we become afraid or angry, it's best to stop and say "I can't help you with this any more. Let's both get up now—I can't listen any longer." It's very important to keep our children's trust by not pretending

to help them when we are confused or angry. Be forewarned, however, that once a child has started working through her fears, it's hard for her to stop in the middle of the process. If you have to move away abruptly, it may take her awhile to return to her normal self. She may continue to find reasons to be upset, angry or afraid, hoping you'll return to help her finish the job she started.

Because a child's fears feel so compelling, and because we tend to get angry easily when there is open struggle against us, the role of listener to a child's fears takes time and practice to learn. You may notice that you can be supportive until she insults your parenting, which makes you angry, or until she looks at you in panic, which makes you panic, too. Talking to another adult about what triggers your fears or anger will help you navigate ever farther into this uncharted territory. Listening to a child's fears requires that parents wrestle with raw feelings, both their children's and their own.

When Children Avoid the Thing They Fear

When your child runs to you and tries to hide herself from a scary situation, your role in getting the healing process started is straightforward. First, ensure her safety. Remove any real threat. Then gently encourage her to face the situation that frightened her. Asking her to look at the person or thing she fears, or to get a little closer might be a good first step. If a child is stiff with fear, you'll have to retreat to a safer distance before you ask her to look. You may have to nudge a bit, lifting her face out of your lap or scooting both of you just an inch or two closer. You are trying to strike a delicate balance: loving attention and safety plus a dash of what feels to the child like danger. If you show too little warmth and acceptance ("Come on, now, walk right up to that doggie. Let's go!"), a child feels forced to behave, and can't freely shed her fears. If you provide too much sympathy ("Come here, honey. That's a very scary big doggie. We'll go where there are no doggies."), a child doesn't have the backing she needs to face the feelings of fear that need to bubble up in order for recovery to occur.

One child in my day care center became afraid whenever lunch was served. She wouldn't sit down to eat, and was very upset when offered any food except milk and Cheerios. She would be quiet and withdraw to the other side of the room



when it was time for a hot meal. To start her recovery from her fears, all that was required was that a trusted caregiver go to her, gently put an arm around her, and suggest (not demand) that she come to lunch. As she felt the slight nudge toward the table, she would begin to scream, protest and perspire. When she would stop to look around after some minutes of panic, her caregiver would say, "Can we go over to the table now?" and nudge her again in that direction. She would focus again on her fears. Sometimes, we had to bring her to the table against her will, because a caregiver was needed with the other children. She could tremble and cry quite well on the caregiver's lap while lunch proceeded for the other children. After many full lunchtime panics, she began to be able to laugh about trying to touch her food, and at last, she began to voluntarily sample and eat foods she once was not able to look at. We never knew how her fear of food began, but we did succeed in helping her dissolve it.

Laughter Helps Children **Dissolve Fears**

If your child's fear is not too overwhelming, you can begin to help lift it by encouraging her laughter, which releases the lighter tensions caused by fear. Your child will laugh if you can be comically afraid of the thing she fears at a time when she does not feel threatened. When you act afraid in a goofy, playful way, your child will be able to laugh heartily over and over, and will probably join into the play in the powerful "I can tell you what to do and you have to do it!" role. This new power balance—the big person scared and helpless, the little person bold and masterful—is such a relief from a child's daily experience that laughter rolls plentifully as tensions ease.

One six-year-old I know was afraid to make telephone calls. All his friends used the phone easily, but he would always ask his mother to make calls for him, with a whine in his voice and a hangdog look. One day, when he and his mother were at home alone together, she brought the phone down onto the floor where he was playing and said with exaggerated insecurity, "I have to call Mary, but I don't think I can do it! Oh, dear! I wish I didn't have to!" She began to dial, but slammed the receiver down in a panic. "I can't do it!" By this time, her son was curious and amused, but was not yet laughing. She kept going. "Oh, how can I

do this? I won't know what to say!" She started to dial, screeched and flung the receiver out of her hand like a hot potato. At that point, he laughed heartily. The mother continued her chicken-hearted monologue, being sure to fling the receiver away often, since that seemed to be the key to much laughter. After awhile, he began directing her: "Pick it up, Mom. Come on, you have to call her, now!" Eventually, she dialed seven digits, pretended to begin a conversation, and then hung up in a panic. More hearty laughter followed. Her son began to deride her, "Mom, you are so dumb! Can't you even talk on the phone?" He would hand her the receiver, and she would throw it down in fear. Much laughter and some roughhousing ensued, as Mom tried to crawl away from her task, and her son laughingly dragged her back to the telephone amidst her pitiful protests.

After twenty minutes or so of animated play, Mom said she had to get on with her chores, and stopped the game. Twice more in the next week, she found time to play the telephone game, looking for the places that made her son laugh and elaborating on those themes. She said nothing serious or instructive to him about making his own calls. A couple of days after their third telephone session, her son asked her for his best friend's number. She asked him if he wanted help making the call. He said no, that he wanted her to go in the other room while he made it himself. She went, and listened from a distance while he made his first independent phone call.

This mother's game illustrates a general point: children can laugh their way toward increased confidence. Children love to play games in which they are the swift, the brave, the sure, and the adult is the slow, the timid, the befuddled. The laughter and permission to romp freely permit children to get a taste of power, and to release the stored tension they've collected as denizens of a big, noisy, surprising, adult-paced world.

This type of play often gives your child a way to present and work through her deeper fears. For example, perhaps your daughter has been jumping on you to for a horseback ride, laughing merrily as you gently shake her off and try feebly to get away. The game has been going on for twenty minutes or so. She lightly bumps her knee on the carpet—clearly, not a bad bump. But she looks at you with hurt and blame in her eyes, clams up and rolls away from you. She lies there, remote and still. As you gently hold her and encourage her to look at you, she starts to scream and kick as if you were hurting her. She has used the safety of the wonderful game you were playing as her springboard into recovery from her tougher fears. This leap from laughter to tight feelings of fear is almost always sudden. It baffles parents, who try to curtail active play before it gets to this productive but difficult stage. We have children who are eager to do the work of recovering from their fears, and who sense a prime opportunity when we play

freely and thoughtfully with them.

Fears in the Night

Many children have trouble going to sleep at night, or awaken fearful before morning arrives. A good way to begin to heal bedtime fears is to engage in lots of active play, laughter and roughhousing (not tickling) that allows the child the upper hand, before bedtime. This brings you and your child into close physical contact, which is a prime source of reassurance for children. It also lets your child feel understood: children feel very close to adults when play and laughter are at the heart of their time together. When it's time for bed, your child will have much easier access to the fears and other feelings that interfere with her sense of safety. She may start by protesting her bedtime, or by refusing to brush her teeth, or by insisting that story after story be read. Simply be pleased, confident, and keep heading in the bedtime direction. "I know you don't like it, Celia, but it's time to hop in bed, now." "Let's turn your body toward the bathroom, where your little blue toothbrush is!" "I've read three stories. We'll have to save that one for tomorrow." Once again, you want to provide safety with your warmth, together with a little nudge toward the thing your child fears.

At some point, your child will be able to break into struggle, perspiration and frightened crying. Whatever the trigger point is, keep a light finger on it: if your child cries and struggles against moving toward the bathroom to brush her teeth, hold her and remind her now and then, "It's still time to walk to the bathroom and get ready for bed, Ceila." If she screams and grasps at you when you move your arm to leave after cuddling in bed, hold your arm a bit away, so she can feel the impending separation (as well as the safety of your other arm, tucked around her body). If you focus on getting the job done, getting her teeth brushed or the painful separation over with, these times of working through fear will irritate you greatly. To help heal a child's fears, we adults have to relax our immediate timetables. The work takes time and effort, but it eventually frees you and your child from dependence on long bedtime rituals that only temporarily placate a child's underlying fears. Work on bedtime fears also seems to improve a child's overall sense of safety in the world.

One couple, after spending two hours each night for months trying to soothe their three-year-old to sleep, decided to help her wrestle her fears. They cuddled with her, told her they were going to get up and go in the other room, and moved away just enough to start her crying. If they held her too close, the crying and struggling would stop, so they held her gently about a foot from them so that she could see them. She struggled, cried and perspired mightily for almost two hours. They were exhausted. At last, her frightened look cleared, she asked for a kiss from each, then said she wanted to lie down. They tucked her in and stood in her doorway for a few moments while she fell asleep. They were very worried that they had done her harm. When her mother picked her up from day care the next afternoon, the caregiver, who had not been told about the previous night's doings, came up to the mother and said, "Cora was extraordinary today. She was so friendly, so outgoing, so thoughtful of the other children. We've never seen her this sure of herself!" She had a few more short cries at bedtime during the next few weeks, but was able to relax and go to sleep far more quickly than before.

When your child wakes in the night terrified, you can help her make significant gains in undoing the fears that seize her. The biggest problem with night terrors is that we parents aren't at our most attentive in the wee hours of the night. Your child is ready to struggle, perspire and cry away her fears and she needs only your presence to keep the process going. It's often helpful to turn on a nightlight, so that when her dream is over she'll know where she is. Don't worry too much about hurrying her out of her dream. She'll awaken when she's been able to fight her fears long enough. In a way, the dream is useful to her. It provides access to the feelings of fear so she can dissolve them through trembling and perspiration.

Paying attention to your child's fears during the day with laughing games and permission to tremble and cry will help resolve some of her nighttime fears. However, it seems that children address certain of their fears only when their conscious guard is down, during sleep. If you sleep with your child, you may occasionally find that she perspires or trembles noticeably during the night. This is the healing process at work—without lots of help from you, for once.

When Fear Causes Aggression

Sometimes children mask their fears. They feel uncomfortably distant and alone, but can't think of how to help themselves. In this state, they behave normally as long as they can, and then suddenly hit another child, pull little sister's hair, or start to lash out at you. These aggressive moments are like the plague to parents. They are easily misunderstood as intentional acts of meanness and they drive a wedge of irritation between parent and child. We feel, "Why doesn't she know how to control herself yet? She's already __ years old!"

When people are afraid, they can't think, and this is true whether they're two or sixty-two. Children are especially literal as they "tell" us they are afraid. If your child has been pushed on the playground, she'll be inclined to push someone when she is afraid. Children who have been called names or who have seen others hurt by name-calling will issue those insults when they feel tense or isolated, whether they understand the words they're using or not. Fearful incidents are often precisely reprinted in a child's aggressive behavior toward others.

To help a child work on fears that make her lash out, a parent must anticipate the trouble, get there before the hurtful deed is done, and step in to prevent harm. If you move in after one child has hurt another, the aggressor usually feels so guilty she can't show any feelings at all. She won't feel safe enough to cry effectively or to tremble her upset away.

Every child gives some warning signals that her fears are getting the best of her. It will take some investigative work to pinpoint these warning signs. Watch and listen carefully. The following are some of the signals I remember from particular children I have known. "When Mommy spends the evening away from home, Louie will bite other children at day care the next morning." "When other children sit close to Carol for longer than a minute or two, she will hit or kick them." "When Bobby comes home after school and slams the door behind him without looking at anyone, he will start insulting his little sister within ten minutes." "When toddler Jenny is left in the presence of a baby, she can be tender for about half a minute, and then she begins to poke and jab." "When Nathan walks into nursery school late, he immediately starts calling children names."

Once you know the warning signals, lifting fear from the child is a matter of being there to add your warmth and attention to the situation as it ripens. You want to allow the child's fears to rise to the surface, where they can be felt and shed. So you stay warm and close, perhaps right next to the child you expect will lash out. At the same time, you are on the alert to protect others from being victimized. When she finally leans over to bite, or reaches out to pull hair, or begins to kick, you stop the action gently but firmly. Bring her into your lap, or catch her hand on its journey toward little brother's hair, or hold her leg so she can try to kick, but no one is touched. You needn't say much. Perhaps you say, "I can't let you hurt Danny." "Looks like you're wanting to bite. Come onto my lap for a moment." "I'm going to hold this leg so it doesn't hurt Manuel." If your voice is steady and matter-of-fact, a child won't be frightened by your feelings and can concentrate on her own. When she feels like hurting someone but is prevented from doing so without blame or upset, your child will be able to feel and work through the fears that cause her to lash out. She will try to struggle away from you, or will simply burst out with upset. If she stays stiff and remote, warmly encourage her to look at you and to tell you what's bothering her.

One toddler at my day care center would inevitably bite other children when he hadn't seen his mother the night before. Since she attended regular classes, we knew exactly which mornings to expect him to be fearful enough to bite. He would enter the room somewhat quiet and withdrawn on these days, but would say goodbye without clinging and start to play. We learned to have a caregiver greet him warmly, and then stay within two feet of him, so that when he lunged for a child's arm, she had a good chance of stopping him before he made contact. She would slide an arm around his tummy so he couldn't reach any farther, and bring him over to her lap. He would squirm and look away. If she talked gently to him, saying "Louie, I'm sorry you don't feel so well this morning. I can't let you bite Annie. Tell me what's got you upset," he would cry and struggle to get away, perspiring and working through his fears.

If the caregiver had to leave him partway through to attend to another child he would sit on the floor looking forlorn. When she returned with warm words and the reassurance of her embrace he would struggle and cry some more. We found that if he could work in this way on his fears and sadness for about 15 minutes, he would emerge more cheerful, and would usually be able to make it through the morning without biting. If we couldn't give him enough time to work, or if we were so peeved that he couldn't find the safety to cry, the biting behavior would surface again and again. Over a period of many months of short opportunities to work through his fears, he grew gentler, trusted us more and was more easily able to simply cry when he was upset, rather than storing

tension until he had to lash out.

Listening to a Child's Fears Is Like Walking a Tightrope

Almost no parent has ever seen another adult listen to a child work through her heavy fears. What we have seen is harshness, humiliation or rejection aimed at children whose fears have overcome them. "Stop all that fuss right now, or I'll tan that hide of yours!" "Come on, don't be a baby. You go into that classroom now or I'll tell the teacher you want to stay home and be Mamma's boy!" "Every time you hit your sister, I'm going to put you in your room and shut the door. That'll teach you!" It takes time, practice, and lots of support to step away from our habits of punishing children when they act out of fear. We are reaching for the ability to help them shed their fears, to dig out the root cause of their timidities and their aggressions. Like tightrope walkers, we must balance ourselves carefully against the pull of old habits. We inch forward on a totally new trust in our children's recuperative powers: when they lie cradled in our arms, feeling deeply afraid, we listen. We stay with them through the feelings, holding them gently until they rediscover their sense of safety. Then, across the wire at last, we watch as they enjoy their world again, less afraid and more powerful than before.

For most parents, to learn this kind of listening requires repeated conscious effort. We have found over the years that parents who want to stretch their ability to listen do better when they are listened to themselves. Parent-to-parent listening partnerships and Parent Resource Groups that meet regularly are both effective sources of support. They provide parents with a chance to think things through, to share laughter about common predicaments and to be reminded of how deeply each of us cares about our children.

Hand in Hand helps parents when parenting gets hard.

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