



When Children Have Strong Feelings

a newsletter for people who care about self-esteem

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Dear Readers,

Welcome to WE, a newsletter for and about groups of people who get together for the purpose of giving each other personal support, examining attitudes, and learning new skills.

The last two issues have been about grief - grieving the dream and grieving the death of a person. **This issue is also about feelings. The focus is on skills for validating feelings in order to build relationships with children. Building healthy connections, not codependency.**

In that light of accepting feelings (and thoughts), let me assure you that if you, like one of my friends, disagreed with what I said in the last issue about Mother Teresa, Princess Diana, Viktor Frankl, and Red Skelton, I honor your perceptions and position. We each have our own impressions and frames of reference from which we make our interpretations. I thank you all for your comments.

This issue is about helping children make their own honest assessments of their experiences without having to deny or change or hide their feelings to please us. We may also use these tools to improve our communication with other adults.

Also, on page seven, you will find the affirmation sheet that some of you have requested.

Sincerely,

Jean Hlsky Clarke

Building Connections With Children

One of the most important gifts we can offer a child is our willingness to connect and to build ongoing relationships. Three ways we do that are by offering our *interest* in the child's perception, our *presence* to provide safety as he interprets his perception, and our *validation of his feelings* by mirroring the intensity and direction of his affect. As you read the following examples you will probably realize that you are already skillful at being present, showing interest, and at mirroring feelings. We will look at examples of each and then consider how they fit together.

Being Present

Being present is being there; showing by your presence that a caring adult is in charge and will provide whatever safety is needed.

Examples:



The baby cries, the mother, attuned to the call, is on her feet before the other adults hear the cry. She is *present* and ready to care for her child.



The preschoolers are playing and there is a crash. The child care provider moves immediately to the scene, is *present* to provide safe support to the children as they learn to cope with the episode.



It is the first recital in which the child is participating. Dad is there. He is *present*. Or, if he could not attend later, that evening or as soon as possible, Dad says, *I wanted to be*

there for you, but I couldn't. Will you help me almost be there by telling (or showing or acting out) what happened? Dad is attending. By his presence he is saying, It is safe for you to describe what happened and how you felt about it, including how you felt about my not being there.

Showing Interest

Showing interest is connecting with a child by finding out what is going on with the child. We ask, listen, respond, read homework, celebrate achievements, visit school, talk about TV and movies, get to know friends.



Examples:

When Mother asks, "What is it? Are you hungry?" the infant has no words with which to respond, but Mother searches until she discovers what baby needs.

After the child care provider has moved the children safely away from the broken glass and picked up the pieces, she asks, "How did you feel when you heard that loud

noise (...dropped the pitcher, ...or whatever)?" She accepts what the children report about feelings without interpreting or trying to change the feelings. She may ask for a behavior change in the future. She may add her own response, *I jumped and I felt scared that someone might be hurt. I'm glad no one was hurt.*



If Dad attended Andrea's recital, he asks, *How did you feel when you walked on the stage (...made the mistake, ...got so much applause)?* He listens to her report of the experience without interpreting it or attempting to change it. He offers his own perception, *I am proud and I enjoyed it. Or I guess I thought you did a better job than you think you did.*

Validating Feelings

Accept the Specific Feeling

Honoring feelings by validating them means accepting the feelings - after all, they are the child's reality even if they are very different from our feelings or from what we wish they had felt.

Rather than telling a child how to feel: *That should make you happy, or I know this will make you mad, or You are not scared of that, or Don't be mad at me,* it is important to notice how the child does feel.

If the child feels sad, offer comfort or compassion. Add comforting touch if the child wants it. If the child is frightened, provide safety or information to help the child make herself feel safe or, depending on the event, offer information about why that situation is not hazardous. Hold the child's hand, hug, touch him on the shoulder. Hug or massage a baby or wrap her more firmly and securely in her blanket.

If the child is angry, take the anger seriously and treat it as a signal that there is something that the child needs or wants. If it is a need, help the child get the need met. If it is a want, help the child get what is wanted if it is appropriate, or help the child accept anger as an understandable response if he does not get what he wants. If he continues to hold the anger for more than a few minutes, try to find out if there is another need or want that is bubbling up from underneath.

If the child is confused, offer information or help her get information for herself.

If the child is feeling satisfied or confident, notice, nod, or smile. Maybe give him a pat on the shoulder.

If the child is joyful, respond joyfully. Celebrate with her, if she wants you to, or let her know that you expect her to celebrate within herself. Some children do that by walking and humming a

happy tune, some by dancing, some by day dreaming, some by talking, some by making or buying a small object or a book by which to remember the occasion.

If the child is loving, receive the love willingly, honor it, and offer love, appreciation, and delight in return if you can. If you can't love a child, the essence of a child, the potential of a child, make a sincere effort to find out what is stopping you. Whatever a child's behavior, there is a kid who needs loving hiding in there somewhere. Sometimes you just have to take this on faith when kids are testing your staying power.

Reciprocal Affect - Mirror the Feeling or the Intensity of the Feeling

Another way to validate feelings is to mirror the affect and/or the intensity of affect the child is showing.

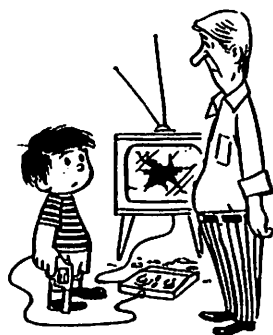
Does this mean that when children are scared we should be even more scared or when children are angry we should get mad at them? No. It means that we respond in a way that honors their specific feelings, that we accept that they are feeling that way. We say, *You are acting really mad. What*

happened? Not, You have nothing to be mad about.

It also means that we respond to the level at which those feelings are expressed.

This kind of honoring is sometimes called *reciprocal affect*. *Reciprocal affect* may mean mirroring a specific affect, as in being joyful with the child or empathizing with sadness. Often it means matching the degree of the child's affect with another affect; child is *very* upset, parent is *equally* protective or responsive. The parent brings a physical intensity and concern with voice and facial expression that matches the level of the child's affect. If the child is hysterical, the high energy with which the adult listens to and attempts to calm the child lets the child know the adult is noticing the child's level of concern.

Some adults assume that they should not mirror a child's level of feeling for fear the child will escalate. But a child who is very excited or upset can feel put off by an adult who is deadpan calm and seems not



to notice the intensity of the child's concern or pleasure. He may escalate even more to try to get the adult to respond. The adult who wishes to calm the

child can match the child's intensity and then start to breathe more slowly and speak more softly. The child will usually calm down as the parent slowly relaxes.

On the other hand, the child who casually remarks that no one at school likes him may be reassured by an equally casual, *Good thing I like you*, but may be put off by the adult who excitedly heaps love, acceptance, praise and affirmation all over him at that time.

Examples:

When baby smiles, mother smiles back and often hugs, pats or tickles a little. When baby screams, mother's question, *What is the matter?* may be said in a loud or a soft voice, but with intensity, with concern. Her gaze is direct and her touch is sure.

When Danny withdraws and doesn't want to talk about the noise of the broken glass, his care provider says quietly, *It's OK not to talk about it now. The broken pitcher is all cleaned up. If you want me to help you practice carrying a pitcher so you won't drop it, let me know.*

If Kyle jerks his shoulders and with flashing eyes announces loudly that he is glad he broke the glass, the provider straightens her own body and says in an almost loud voice, *Kyle, I hear you.* Then in a softer voice, *However, here at this center*

I expect you to learn how to carry things safely. Let me know when you want to practice. Notice that the provider described desired behavior, but she did not tell Kyle how to feel.



If Dad missed the recital and Andrea says she feels as if she isn't important, Dad says with an equal level of concern, *I guess I would have felt that way too.* Then with less intensity, *That's a lousy way to feel. What can you and I do together so you get your important feeling back?*

Encourage Intelligence

Why is honoring feelings so important? Children learn about their inside world and their response to the outside world from their feelings, so when we honor children's feelings we honor their knowing. We also encourage their intellectual growth according to Stanley I. Greenspan. In his book, *The Growth of the Mind and the Endangered Origins of Intelligence*,¹ he proposes that intelligence gets its boost more from emotional experience than from cognitive stimulation. Do you think children learn faster when their feelings are attended to before we offer a lesson?

Putting Presence, Interest, and Reciprocal Affect Together

How to combine these three skills may seem least obvious when we think about caring for infants, so let us look at how the Baileys combined *being present*, *showing interest*, and *honoring feelings* in response to their baby.

First think about what we do with babies when they cry. We go to them immediately, we are *present* for their needs. We try helping them in many ways until we meet their particular need and they stop crying. If they don't stop crying, we know that we are unable to meet their need and we just live through it. But we stay present, trying to be helpful, and being careful not to blame them or get impatient. Meanwhile we use our *interest*; we keep listening and looking and feeling for cues. We *honor their feelings* by saying *I see you are really upset*.

Feelings tell children what is going on inside their world, and long before they can talk, they try to tell us what they need by their differing ways of crying and fussing.

If we cannot meet a need, it becomes our problem to figure out what that

need is and find ways of meeting it.

What is the problem? Sometimes it is, *I haven't been touched enough*, or *I have been handled too much*, or *Touch doesn't feel good because my skin is sensitive or hurting*. Sometimes the problem is bigger, such as an immature nervous system or an illness or an allergy. Sometimes it is the baby's response to too many changes or to other stresses in the family. Some babies seem to need to cry loudly just before they go to sleep. Sometimes we never do find out what the problem is. In time, either the problem is solved or the child makes an adjustment. We hope it is a healthy one, not one that is costly to the child like withdrawing or having to be overpleasing. So, even with infants, adults are practicing the three great supports: *being present*, *showing interest*, and *honoring feelings*.

Baby Bailey

Baby Bailey had a very busy and stress-filled week. Four days of child care plus trips to the doctor on Wednesday and Saturday. On Sunday he was included in the noisy group that watched the football game at a friend's house. So far, so good, still smiling. Then off Baby goes for his weekly visit with his grandparents while his parents



have some time to themselves. Grandma is delighted and Baby is smiling, but as soon as he realizes Mom and Dad are gone, Baby wails. Nothing will console him. Grandpa comes home and Baby wails even more loudly. Baby Bailey had one more outing than he can handle. Thank goodness for the telephone. *Mom and Dad, I think Baby wants you and needs to go home.* Grandparents showed *presence* and *interest*.

Mom and Dad arrive quickly, *presence*, and ask for a full description of Baby's behavior, *interest*. Dad picks Baby up with concern and energy, his voice and facial expression matching Baby's affect in intensity, *honoring feelings*. Dad tries to jolly Baby in the way Baby usually loves. Baby wails. Dad offers a rattle. Baby wails. Dad offers a bottle. Baby wails. Dad says, *Mom, you try. What I'm doing isn't working*, *presence* and *interest*.

Mom takes Baby with willingness and energy, *honoring feelings*, and holds Baby in her lap in the sitting-up-with-his-head-near-her-heart favorite position. She gently rocks back and forth, protective arms held tightly around Baby, repeatedly kisses him gently on the head, lightly rests her chin on his head, all the time crooning with heartfelt sympathy, *Baby, I'm so sorry. We didn't understand. We are here for you. We will take you home. It's all right. Thank you for telling us it wasn't working for you. I'm so sorry.*

It's OK. We just didn't understand. We are here now. Baby looks seriously and stoically straight ahead for the first minutes of this comforting and then relaxes into Mom's arms. Ten minutes later he is willing to take his bottle from Dad.

Mom Bailey had successfully honored Baby's feelings. Her level of concern and sympathy matched the level of Baby's distress *and* her responses matched Baby's type of concern. Baby needed to reconnect through care and comforting. Dad's jolly and offering a rattle didn't work because Baby likes being entertained only when everything else is OK. Baby's need was for the familiarity and rhythm of his own household and for his parents to understand and accept that.

For excellent help on understanding what infants and children through three years need at each age, see T. Berry Brazelton's, *Touchpoints: Your Child's Emotional and Behavioral Development*.²



Offering Love

All three of these ways of interacting are ways of expressing love.

Children need *presence*. They need someone who cares and is there. Baby Bailey needed the people he has bonded with. The older children get, the more they can accept *presence* from people beyond the family or whomever is providing the primary care at the moment.

Children need *interest*. They need the present person to be willing to learn what is important to them and how to respond effectively to them. *Showing interest* is what adults do when they are learning to recognize the child's intraverted or extroverted tendencies and when they honor the child's preference for auditory, visual, or kinesthetic expressions.

Children need to have the feelings they are expressing *validated* by adult responses that match the *degree* with which they are expressing the feeling and that honors the *content* of what they are feeling.

Does This Work With All Children?

What works with any particular child is what works with that particular child. But the starting point involves three things: *Being present, showing interest, and honoring feelings*.³

- If you are attempting to improve your ability to do one of these things and you are not being effective, apologize and try again.

- Remember that parenting is an art, not a science, and when we learn to use new tools to help us connect, we often miss the mark.
- Remember, there are some things about relationships that can only be known intuitively.
- Pay attention to your hunches about how to do things effectively.
- Trust yourself to grow.

It is honoring to accept the feeling a child expresses and to match the child's level of intensity in your helpful response.

Does This Work for You?

Some adults have a preference for one of the ways of validating feelings. a way that feels most comfortable to them. If this is true for you, celebrate the one you do well, and practice adding the other two, especially if the one you prefer doing is working well. Give yourself permission to practice all three and find the balance that works for you and your child.

Notes

1. Greenspan, Stanley I. *The Growth of the Mind: And the*

Endangered Origins of Intelligence. Addison Wesley Longman, 1997.

2. Brazelton, T. Berry, *Touchpoints: Your Child's Emotional and Behavioral Development.* Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1992.
3. Thanks to Jody Putnam for writing the article *Reflections of an Integrative Psychotherapist* in the *Transactional Analysis Journal*, Oct. 1996, Vol. 26, No. 4. It reminded me that what people need in therapy is what they missed earlier and I was inspired to write this *WE* to help us all remember to honor children's feelings the first time around.

Activity I

To be done in a group or individually

Goal: To practice offering *presence, interest, and honoring feelings*, and to contrast different ways of doing that.

1. Describe presence, interest, and honoring feelings or mirroring, or read parts of the *WE* aloud.
2. Select an incident from the following list or choose one of your own.
 - Child is hurt physically
 - Child's feelings have been hurt
 - Child is scared of a neighborhood bully
 - Child is apprehensive about a test
 - Child is dejected about not being asked to a birthday party

Child is angry about not having certain designer clothes

Child is concerned about a friend using drugs

Child has used drugs and is denying it

3. Identify two ways you could show presence, express interest, and honor feelings for a child you know.
4. Identify how you could show the three about this incident if the child were 5, 10, 15 or any three ages you choose.

Activity II

For a group

Goal: To observe several ways the same incident could be approached using presence, interest, and honoring feelings.

1. Describe presence, interest, and honoring feelings or read parts of the *WE* aloud.
2. Select a problem from the group.
3. Ask people to move into groups of three.
4. Ask each group to decide how they would offer presence, interest, and mirroring.
5. Ask each group to role play their ways of responding to the incident. They may role play one child and two adults or one child and one adult.
6. Ask the person who identified the incident to tell what she learned if she wants to.
7. Ask the other members to report what they learned.

EDUCATIONAL AFFIRMATIONS

From HELP! for Parents

by Jean Illsley Clarke

Being
I'm glad
you are
alive.

Being, Stage I, 0 to 6 months

- I'm glad you are alive.
- You belong here.
- What you need is important to me.
- I'm glad you are you.
- You can grow at your own pace.
- You can feel all of your feelings.
- ♥ I love you and I care for you willingly.

Doing, Stage II, 6 to 18 months

- You can explore and experiment and I will support and protect you.
- You can use all of your senses when you explore.
- You can do things as many times as you need to.
- You can know what you know.
- You can be interested in everything.
- I like to watch you initiate and grow and learn.
- ♥ I love you when you are active and when you are quiet.

Thinking, Stage III, 18 months to 3 years

- I'm glad you are starting to think for yourself.
- It's OK for you to be angry and I won't let you hurt yourself or others.
- You can say no and push and test limits as much as you need to.
- You can learn to think for yourself and I will think for myself.
- You can think and feel at the same time.
- You can know what you need and ask for help.
- ♥ You can become separate from me and I will continue to love you.

Identity and Power, Stage IV, 3 to 6 years

- You can explore who you are and find out who other people are.
- You can be powerful and ask for help at the same time.
- You can try out different roles and ways of being powerful.
- You can find out the results of your behavior.
- All of your feelings are OK with me.
- You can learn what is pretend and what is real.
- ♥ I love who you are.

Structure, Stage V, 6 to 12 years

- You can think before you say yes or no and learn from your mistakes.
- You can trust your intuition to help you decide what to do.
- You can find a way of doing things that works for you.
- You can learn the rules that help you live with others.
- You can learn when and how to disagree.
- You can think for yourself and get help instead of staying in distress.
- ♥ I love you even when we differ; I love growing with you.

Identity, Sexuality and Separation, Stage VI, adolescence

- You can know who you are and learn and practice skills for independence.
- You can learn the difference between sex and nurturing and be responsible for your needs and behavior.
- You can develop your own interests, relationships and causes.
- You can learn to use old skills in new ways.
- You can grow in your maleness or femaleness and still be dependent at times.
- I look forward to knowing you as an adult.
- ♥ My love is always with you. I trust you to ask for my support.

Interdependence, Stage VII, adult years

- Your needs are important.
- You can be uniquely yourself and honor the uniqueness of others.
- You can be independent and interdependent.
- Through the years you can expand your commitments to your own growth, to your family, your friends, your community and to all humankind.
- You can build and examine your commitments to your values and causes, your roles and your tasks.
- You can be responsible for your contributions to each of your commitments.
- You can be creative, competent, productive and joyful.
- You can trust your inner wisdom.
- You can say your hellos and good-byes to people, roles, dreams, and decisions.
- You can finish each part of your journey and look forward to the next.
- ♥ Your love matures and expands.
- ♥ You are lovable at every age.

Being
I love you
and I care
for you
willingly.

Doing
I love you
when you are
active and
when you
are quiet.

Thinking
You can
become
separate from
me and I will
continue to
love you.

Identity and Power
I love
who you
are.

Structure
I love you
even when
we differ;
I love growing
with you.

Identity,
Sexuality,
Separation
My love is
always with
you. I trust
you to ask for
my support.

Interdependence
You are
lovable at
every age.

Interdependence
Your love
matures
and expands.

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**Opening
To Help a Group Focus on
Feelings**

Hand out name tags and ask people to:

- Choose a partner. Make a name tag for her and ask her to tell you one time her feelings were or were not validated and what she did about that.
- Introduce your partner and tell the group what she did when her feelings were or were not validated if she is willing for you to share that information.

**Closing
That Encourages People to
Claim Their Power**

At the end of the meeting, briefly review the activities of the meeting.

- Ask several people to share one way they will show *interest* during the coming week.
- Ask for Resentments. Listen to resentments, do not defend or explain.
- Ask for Appreciations.

WE

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Edited by Jean Illsley Clarke

* Ideas and activities or materials to use individually or in support groups.

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