

# Setting Limits with Children



*by Patty Wipfler*

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Children are not moderate in their ways. They love passionately and without caution, they learn eagerly at a tremendous rate, and they set out to do everything that interests them. Children are born experimenters, philosophers, artists and problem-solvers. They love to be themselves, special and irreplaceable. What draws adults to children is their willingness to step out and be someone, to try openly, to show us their hearts.

In contrast to their enthusiastic, loving nature, all children (like all adults) experience times when they aren't themselves. They lose their sunny attitude, their ability to make each day a good one. As they become less themselves, they become unreasonable. They can't listen or respond thoughtfully to the situation around them. Their behavior goes off track, and they begin to do things that don't work, things that isolate them from other people. At these times, we find ourselves in a difficult spot. We want to treat our children well, but they aren't listening to reason. Every effort to guide them sends them further off track. How do we best respond?

When our children are unreasonable, they are asking for our help. They need us to set limits for them. They also need to know that we care about them. It's our caring that puts them back on track again. How can we set limits and offer our love to our children at the same time?

Let's look first at what helps children to be reasonable, and then let's take a look at what happens to send them off track.

## Children Thrive When They Feel Connected

Children need to feel connected to us. It's as basic a need as the need for nourishment, water, or sleep. When a child feels the bond

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To simplify the text, this article is addressed to parents. The information will also work well for adults from outside the family who play vital roles in the lives of children as their grandparents, stepparents, caregivers, teachers, neighbors, and friends.

between her and her parents, or between her and other significant adults, she is able to be pleased with herself, to learn, to experiment, and to love. Our children's need for connection with us is very strong throughout childhood. Infants connect with their parents by gazing into their parents' eyes for long moments. They soak in the feeling of being seen, held, and cared for. Eye contact, gentle touch, warmth in our voices, and sweet words are balm for a young child's being. Connection is needed in generous amounts, day in and day out. This steady encouragement makes children feel good about themselves. It lets them know that it's safe for them to love and learn. As they grow, feeling connected helps them build an inner confidence that holds strong even when they are challenged by difficult situations in the world around them.

A child who is feeling seen and cherished has good judgment. She is able to show affection for others. She is able to share. She's able to be satisfied even under trying circumstances: she can wait for the baby to be nursed before getting to play with her Mom; she can agree to listen to Dad's favorite radio station on the ride home from after school care. The feeling that she and her parents are close can tide her over during times when they aren't able to be with each other and refresh that closeness minute by minute.

This feeling of connection lends children quite a bit of power. Connected, they are confident learners. They develop an ability to judge which people are safe to have as friends, and which people are out of touch with the needs of young people. They solve problems well. They have a sunny, enthusiastic approach to life that carries them fearlessly toward new experiences.

## **A Child's Sense of Connection Is Easily Broken**

Our children's sense of connection is the foundation of their confidence: it can also be quite fragile. A harsh word or an angry look can frighten a child and break her sense of connection. Periods of time separated from Mommy or Daddy can break a child's sense of connection. Adult arguments and displays of hard feelings break

a child's sense of connection. In fact, witnessing mistreatment or disrespect between of any kind will frighten children and break their sense of connection. And there are lots of little things that we adults see as harmless, like the howling of the wind or the sudden motion of a carnival ride, that can frighten a child who doesn't understand them, and break the child's sense of connection.

## **When a Child Doesn't Feel Connected, She Can't Think**

When a child's sense of connection breaks, she can't function well anymore. This situation is as painful to her (although not necessarily as permanent) as breaking her leg. With her connection to you broken, your child can't think well. She can't remember that you love her, or that she loves anyone. She loses her good judgment. She may withdraw and stop enjoying her life. She may lose herself in fiercely isolated activity. Or she may lash out at you or others. She can't tell that she's safe. She can't relax. She can't cooperate. She can't respond thoughtfully to anything you say. In a sense, this broken connection results in "broken thinking."

When a child breaks a bone, the pain is immediate and intense. It's clear to everyone that the child needs adult help to heal. She gets that help, and quickly. When a child's thinking breaks down, however, the tradition in most cultures has been to blame her. We've been taught to scold, to lecture, to punish, or to isolate the child. We feel like children are manipulating us. We see the unruly behavior and act as though the child has *chosen* to go off track. Often, we feel like our unreasonable child is pointedly trying to make life harder on us.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Your child loves to cooperate with you. She loves to be in tune with the people around her, playing and experimenting as she was born to do. When her sense of connection breaks, she has been hurt. This hurt is emotional in nature, but it's as real as a broken bone. Just as a child would never set out to break her own leg, she doesn't set out to be

governed by feelings of hurt. Children don't choose to be out of touch. They are driven out of touch by the hard things that happen to them in their lives.

## **Once a Child Has Been Hurt, She May Remain Vulnerable**

When a child has been hurt—her feeling of safety and connection broken—her confidence is damaged. Later, when she faces a similar situation, her thinking is likely to stop again in a similar way. For instance, if your child becomes momentarily lost in a store and is frightened, the incident will stick vividly in her mind even though no real harm came to her. She felt alone and helpless in that moment or two, and her sense of safety and connection broke. Later, when you try to leave her at school or day care, she's likely to be frightened again. Although there's no danger, her thinking stops and she is thrown back into the feelings of fear and helplessness that haven't yet healed. Those feelings are relics of a past hurt, but they still have the power to confuse and overwhelm her.

Some situations hurt children deeply enough that part of their natural enthusiasm for life and trust in other people goes entirely into hiding. Unlike the occasional hurts such as being frightened by a dog or scolded by a neighbor, deep hurts rob a child of part of her birthright. For example, deep hurts can rob a child of feeling loved, of being able to trust people, of knowing that she is beautiful, or of learning confidently in a school situation.

Children don't easily get relief from these more chronic hurts. A deep hurt warps a child's perception all day every day. One example familiar to many of us is the child whose divorced parent remarries. The hurt the child feels from the divorce often gets focused on the stepparent. The stepparent may be loving, but the child's hurt can prevent her from feeling the caring that's offered her. Even though her life is good, she remains under a cloud of bad feelings because the hurt went deep, and it throbs.

Our children are driven off track by hurts large and small, and by innocent situations that remind them of those hurts. They aren't at fault for the hurts they carry, just like they are not at fault for the allergies they may have or for needing to wear glasses. Fortunately, with a little information and the courage to try a new way of setting limits, we parents can help heal our children's hurts. We can help them regain their lost sense of connection, their lost sense of being capable and cherished.

## **When Your Child's Thinking Stops, She Will Signal for Help**

When children's thinking breaks down, they aren't quiet about it. Something is wrong inside of them and they know it. They don't like it. They aren't born to tolerate an irrational mind. They need help, and they let us know.

Unfortunately, when children can't think, they aren't fully able to take their parents' feelings into consideration. Therefore, their signals for help aren't polite. A child who can't think doesn't ask nicely if now might be a moment when she could get a little help, please. She usually does one of two things.

- She gets upset. She begins to tantrum or cry or rage or laugh wildly,
- or,
- Her behavior flares. She does unreasonable and unworkable things.

Neither of these two developments are easy for parents to handle. The behavior of children whose thinking has derailed has been misunderstood for centuries. But there is hope and help. You can learn a new point of view and a new way of setting limits in order to help your child regain her ability to think.

## **An Upset Child Is Trying to Heal the Hurt She Feels**

When a child gets upset, she is trying to heal the hurt she just experienced. She wants to regain her sense of connection. Children are born knowing exactly what heals hurt feelings.

Children heal hurt feelings by laughing, crying, trembling, struggling and perspiring, and having tantrums, while someone close to them listens. We grownups have been taught to see these kinds of messy displays of feelings as bad, childish, out of control, manipulative, or just plain disrespectful. We have been trained to oppose the very process that restores a child's sense of connection and ability to think. We've been taught that it's our job to suppress a child's emotional outbursts, when in fact, a crying or raging child is doing the smartest, most logical thing she can do in her predicament. She is expelling her upset feelings so she can get back to feeling safe and relaxed again.

When your child is crying, she is recovering her sense that all is well. When your child is laughing, she is releasing important inner tensions and rebuilding her connection with you. (However, tickling, which forces a child to laugh, does not help children. In fact, it can create emotional hurt.) When your child is trembling and perspiring as she cries in fear or anger, she is overcoming her fears by expressing them fully, in the safety of your arms. When a child has a tantrum, she is releasing frustration that keeps her from thinking straight.

Lively talk, laughter, tears, tantrums, trembling and perspiring, and occasional yawning are part of a self-correcting mechanism that children are born with. Their acute awareness and sensitivity, which makes them vulnerable to hurt, is complemented by this inborn healing process, which mends the hurt completely if someone is there to support the child while she does the work she needs to do. Even deep hurts can be erased by many cries, many tantrums, many stormy times, and much laughter.

Parents and other caring adults can be a vital part of this damage repair process. When we move close and listen, we provide the love and safety the child needs in order to fully heal the hurt and recover her deep sense of connection.

## **While Working Through Feelings, All a Child Needs Is a Supportive Listener**

While your child is crying, having a tantrum or storming, she needs you close by. She needs to feel your gentle touch, to see your steady gaze. She needs the safety you provide by sheltering her until she can think again. She also may need some verbal reassurance: you can tell her that you are glad to be with her, that you will keep her safe, that you are sorry that she got hurt. Oddly enough, the warmth in your words and voice will probably make her cry harder or rage more vigorously. The safer children feel, the harder they work to dispel bad feelings. Perhaps the feel of relaxed attention lets them know that the hurt is really over, and they cry or storm harder in relief. You probably are already familiar with this phenomenon: a crisis occurs, but your tears don't begin to flow until your friends arrive to help you; after an accident, you finally realize that your wounds will heal and then the trembling begins. Without a sense of safety and connection, people can't easily shed their feelings of hurt.

We call this kind of listening "Staylistening." It's a tool for resolving all kinds of tensions that drive a child's behavior off track. The first several times a parent or caregiver staylistens, a child will often take what seems like a very long time to work feelings through. This is because when something small but upsetting happens and a parent listens, a child will first clean up the feelings directly related to that little incident. Then the child will go on to work through feelings attached to other, more important hard times. Children have an innate dislike for being saddled with bad feelings, and they are happy to work long and hard to drain those feelings of upset when they have an attentive listener.



## **The Rewards for Listening Are Great**

When your child has finished the tantrum or the crying and trembling she needed to do, you'll notice significant changes in her behavior. Children who are freshly relieved of their upsets are generally playful, relaxed, affectionate, flexible, and are usually free of the irrationalities they had leading up to their outburst. Here is what one mother wrote to me after she had told her sister about listening to her upset child:

“When my sister Martha and her two-and-a-half-year-old daughter came to visit me, Martha told me that her relationship with her daughter was growing strained and difficult. She was very frustrated. I told her about this way of working with angry or frustrated children and she was like a sponge! That day Erin had a long hard cry. Martha was in tears too. But she listened, and stayed with Erin through several more long upsets over the next few days. By the time they left two weeks later, Martha said she felt like a new person and Erin was once again the delightful little girl she had been before. Martha was so grateful. She had thought that if Erin was angry, Erin was being ungrateful or inconsiderate or something like that. After a few days I heard Martha saying ‘It’s okay to be angry. Let’s sit together until you feel better inside.’ The change was dramatic. She feels comfortable with feelings being expressed and she and Erin talk about feelings a lot. So thank you, thank you for sharing with us.”

## **When Your Child’s Behavior Flares, She Needs Limits**

When your child’s thinking has broken and she can’t find the safety to laugh extensively or to cry the hurt away, her behavior will flare. She’ll do nonsensical and unworkable things. She’ll do things like hurting the cat or isolating herself or being dissatisfied with everything you do or say. This is your cue to step in. She’s showing you that she’s gone haywire. She needs you to set a limit. Your limit gives her someone or something to blow up at, so that she can release her feelings of upset and come home to you again.

For a child whose behavior is flaring, your gentle but firm limit is a gift. She has your “No” or “Not now” or “I can’t let you do that” as a focus for her upset. Your “No” gives definition to the nameless tensions that have been driving her off track. She now can let her upset show fully. If you follow up the limit by staying close and listening, your gift will be complete. She’ll have the chance to release her upset feelings and recover her sense of connection with you.

## **When Setting Limits, There’s No Need to Attack**

When we were young and someone set a limit with us, they usually waited until they were angry to do it. Most often, along with the limit came an attack. For some of us, it was a physical attack, involving spanking or hitting or arm-yanking or worse. For some it was a verbal attack involving blame, name-calling or fury. Some of us were banished or shunned, cut off from the people we loved and depended on. Our parents didn’t mean to hurt us as they set limits. Sometimes, they were trying to do what they thought was best for us. At other times, in their heated moments, they did to us what was done to them. If they’d had good information and better support, they would have been kinder to us. But no generation has furnished parents with enough help and information, so they floundered at times, as did their parents before them.

Sometimes, our parents’ attacks were an attempt to prepare us for mistreatment they thought the outside world would throw at us. If they were the targets of racism, anti-Semitism or other kinds of stereotyping, they didn’t want us to ever act in such a way as to invite attack from others. As a defensive tactic, they were harsh toward us, thinking that they had to toughen us up to ready us for the outside world. This is often how mistreatment of a minority group by a dominant group—racism and the like—is perpetuated within the target group. Frightened parents target their young and fragile children in an effort to prepare their children for the awful experiences the parents remember and still fear.

What we now know is that every attack hurts a child and jams in more bad feelings, which interfere with the child’s ability to be

pleased with himself and to exercise good judgment. When we feel like attacking a child, we need a chance to be listened to while we talk, laugh, cry, tremble, or storm until we remember that this is a good child who's just having a hard time. There is much more to say about building enough support for ourselves so that we are not so easily upset, and are more satisfied with ourselves and our children. With enough support, we can more consistently see children's off-track behavior as a welcome opportunity to help them.

## **Listen, Limit, Listen**

Few human interactions are tidy, and setting limits is no exception. But here's an approach that will bring you away from the attack or punishment mode and toward interactions that allow a child to use your limit as a way to begin to heal from the hurt that isolates her, and connect with you again.

## **Listen**

When your children's behavior seems off-track to you, get close and listen as a first, information-gathering step. Get down at eye level, close to your child or children, see what's going on, and ask your child what's going on. Ask her why she's yelling, or why she *has* to have the blue dress that's in the wash right now. Try to keep your own upset in check for the moment. To help your child, you'll need to focus on her, not on your own feelings.

In less than a minute you can probably figure out which of the following difficulties are operating.

- **Does your child need information or assistance?**

Sometimes, the only thing children need is information and a little guidance. If your child is upset because she can't find her other sock, you can suggest a few places to look for it. If your children want to chase each other and the baby is sleeping, ask them to move their game outside. Children can be quite happy with this kind of assistance, especially when we don't lecture them or blame them for the things they didn't know or didn't remember.

- **Do your expectations fit your child?**

Your child may seem to be off-track because the track you expect her to be on isn't suited to her age or her ability. Our children's developmental needs are many, and adults weren't born informed about what children of varying ages know or need. To complicate matters, the world of grownups is not set up with children's needs in mind. What is considered proper in many situations is simply too restrictive for a healthy, active, creative child.

For instance, perhaps your child is an active three-year-old who has lots of energy in the morning. If you expect her to be quiet and stand next to you for half an hour at the Department of Motor Vehicles, you are bound to be disappointed. She will strain against your expectations because they don't fit three-year-olds, not because she lacks self-control or always tries to make your morning difficult. Or if you are expecting your nine-year-old boy who has had a string of difficult years in school to sit and do an hour of homework by himself every night, he'll fail. He now carries enough hurt wrapped around the learning process that he (not every nine-year-old, but *he*) will need lots of one-on-one encouragement, play breaks, and appreciation to make it through each evening of homework. He can regain his confidence, but he needs extra support to do it.

If your child is often unable to meet your expectations, consult with someone who knows children well—a teacher, day care provider or an adult you know who is well-liked by children. You may be able to get useful information and a fresh perspective.

- **Are you running on empty?**

There are times when your child is doing just the things children thrive on—running through the apartment as she plays, giggling in bed after lights out, yelling “Hi” to drivers on the road from out the backseat window—and you are bursting with tension. You just can't handle her spirited play. At these times, it is parent tradition to come down with categorical “Just Because” rules.

No giggling Just Because I Said So. All your child can learn from “Just Because” rules is that grownups tend to be arbitrary and short-tempered. It’s much more honest and useful to your child to let her know that you’ve had a hard day, or that your head is throbbing. Let her know there’s nothing wrong with her or with what she wants, but that it won’t work today because of *your* needs. Although you explain the situation, your child may not be able to grant you the break you long for. Her job is to play hard and to live life fully. It does her good to live life at full tilt. If she’s not intimidated by your moods, it’s probably a sign that her confidence is high, as it should be.

When you are running on empty, it’s not the best time to set limits, because your attention is on your own troubles, not on what’s best for your child. If you can, give yourself a “time out” by taking a few minutes alone in the bedroom, or by calling an understanding friend. Your attention is best focused on getting help for you, not on making demands of your child.

- **Is your child unreasonable?**

If your child is indeed unreasonable, she needs your warmth, accompanied by a firm, kind limit on her unreasonable behavior.

## **Limit**

You have listened, and decided that your child’s behavior is indeed off-track. Sometimes this decision takes only a second: if baby’s hair is being pulled or a shoe is about to be thrown across the room, it’s clearly time to set a limit.

With children, setting limits often means putting yourself between the child and his irrational behavior. You can say “Stop pulling baby’s hair” or “Please don’t hit Jamal” but your child isn’t thinking, and verbal requests don’t penetrate the isolation that has overcome her. She can’t control her behavior at this moment. (If she could, she wouldn’t be pulling hair or hitting!) So it becomes your job to ensure that your child doesn’t continue to be irrational. Move in, put your arm around her, and gently prevent further harm from

being done. You might say “I won’t let you hurt Jamal. I’m going to help you stop.” But the important thing is that you act to stop the irrational behavior. This means bringing a kicking, hitting child onto your lap, away from her target, or putting your hand on a treasure she is grabbing from another child, so she can’t run off with it. It may mean easing a child out of the bathroom when it was her sister’s turn to get ready for school.

It doesn’t work to stand back and issue orders to a child whose behavior is beyond reason. She needs someone to offer concrete help at that moment. Your words are far less effective than your kind, firm actions when your child can’t think.

Children often ask adults for limits. They will repeatedly do what they have been told not to do in full view of the adult they hope will help them. They are looking for some way to open up the upset feeling that is throwing them off track. They need a “can opener” so they can get to their feelings, pour them out and be rid of them. The limit you set is precisely this tool. They want to get back to their cooperative, easygoing nature, but to heal, they first have to show you the deep discomfort they feel. The limit you set is their gateway to releasing bad feelings and returning to sound thinking again.

## **Listen**

This is the crown jewel of the three steps. Once you have set the limit, listening to your child’s upset will allow her to recover from the hurt and feel close to you again.

As you move in close to your child to stop her unreasonable behavior, your kindness will allow her to feel the awful feelings she’s carrying inside. She’ll launch into a hearty cry or a tantrum, or struggle to get away from you. At this point, try to stay close and attentive (follow her gently, if need be) so she can continue expressing and shedding the tension she’s been feeling. It may help to say something like “I love you and I can see that you’re hurting. I don’t want you to be alone with all those feelings.” When she

seems to simmer down, invite her to look at you, or gently try to catch her eye. If she's not finished shedding hurt, this invitation for direct contact will remind her that she still doesn't feel good enough to accept your caring, and she'll go back to releasing the hurt with tears, raging, or perhaps even vigorous laughter.

When a child has worked through a chunk of hurt, her attention returns, sometimes suddenly, to ordinary things. She'll start playing with your hair, or notice that there's frost on the window, or find a silly little reason to giggle with you. She won't want to talk about all the crying or raging she just did. Now that she feels better, the present is far more interesting than the outburst she just had. Don't probe with questions like, "Is the real reason you were upset because you miss Daddy?" If your child volunteers that kind of information, fine. But don't fish for it. Probing makes it harder for your child to feel safe enough to show her feelings next time.

## **Here's How It Works**

Here is one father's account of how he set limits with seven-year-old son Jason, who had been constantly fighting with his five-year-old sister:

"Jason and Angelica were constantly at each other's throats. I was at my wits' end with it. This one evening, they were at it again, and I was starting to get a little ticked off. Then I saw an opportunity to help him release and heal his upset. I moved toward him, as kindly as I could, and he got mad and ran into his room. I followed him there. He was still upset, so I got real close to him and he was sweating, struggling and fighting. I closed the door and I told him I wanted to stay with him until he felt better. He was trying to get out of the room. I made sure to tell him that we could leave the room, but not yet—that I wanted to be with him while he felt so bad. I just stayed there with him. He yelled at me and was trying to hit me. I didn't let him hurt me, but I let him keep on going. This lasted about twenty minutes.

“He was crying, sweating, yelling at me and trying to hit me. He was saying ‘You don’t love me!’ I was telling him that I loved him. Then he was saying ‘You hate me!’ I could not believe he was saying that. I just keep comforting him and telling him that I loved him. It just went on and on. I just hoped I was doing the right thing. Finally, I let him out of the room. He hadn’t stopped raging, but I decided that it was enough for now. When we were in the room together he wouldn’t let me get close to him. But after he had a chance to calm down, he was really sweet with me. He let me hold him.

“The difference after this was clear. He and Angelica stopped fighting, and he’s been happier. Tonight, he was skipping with her, and laughing!”

It often happens that little upsets are a child’s way of testing the waters to see if it’s safe enough to work through bigger upsets. This is the story of a mother who set a limit, then listened to her four-year-old daughter and learned about an important incident her daughter hadn’t been able to tell her.

“We were getting ready for bed. I had laid Rebecca’s pajamas out on her bed. I know she saw them there. She began running all over the house in a panic, because she couldn’t find her pajama bottoms. It wasn’t her first upset that evening. She wanted me to find them for her. I knew something big was brewing. So I held the line and told her ‘No, you can find your pajama bottoms. I know you can.’ She insisted she needed help. I told her I wanted her to do it. Finally she ran screaming into her room. She sat down between the two beds, and I came in knowing I would need to listen. She was upset but not crying, so I reached down to bring her closer to me, and she went wild. She kicked, fought, screamed and cried. She was totally enraged. I kept her more or less in my arms—it was a lot of work—and kept her from hurting me. She cried and sweated for about half an hour. Finally, in the middle of all this, she said, ‘You’re just like that boy who tried to kiss me!’



“I had never heard anything about this, so I asked Rebecca what had happened. In the middle of her tears, she told me that a boy in her class at day care had wanted to kiss her. She refused, but he somehow pinned her behind a gate, pushed on her, and tried to force her to kiss him. When she wouldn’t kiss back, he put his hands on her neck and choked her. I was shocked! She finished crying and I told her I was very sorry that this had happened, and that we would take care of it in the morning. The next day, she was able to tell her story to the teacher at school, and it’s being handled. There’s been a lot of this in her class—boys out to forcibly kiss the girls. It was a frightening incident for her. Now, I think she has recovered. She’s eager to go to day care. But what a battle! No wonder she was fighting so hard!”

As you can see, what children need to do to unload the hurt they carry is not easy for parents to handle. But what a difference it makes to know that you can actually help your child undo important hurts!

Parents often ask “Aren’t you promoting disrespect when you let your child say awful things and rage like that?” You need to know that while a child is actually crying, perspiring, and trembling, she is getting vital emotional work done. As she cries and berates you, she is ridding herself of thoughts and attitudes that poison her relationship with you. You might call this emotionally vibrant time a “session,” to remind yourself that a certain kind of important work is being accomplished. During a session, you allow your child full expression of her feelings, and you keep offering to love her and connect with her. You’re not letting her get away with something. You’re working *with* her. Your goal for the moment isn’t good manners. Good manners will come after you’ve helped her shed her awful feelings. Then, the two of you will recover the closeness between you.

It doesn’t help a child to be allowed to berate you or anyone else unless there’s someone to listen and help her shed feelings. Dry, tight, angry language is a signal that your child needs you to move in and set a limit, so she can feel enough warmth to begin to cry

about the hurt she's feeling. So move in and ask what's wrong, or set an expectation that you will be spoken to with respect. Once your child is crying or storming, allowing free expression will help her get the worst feelings out, and won't lead to mistreating people later.

## **Set Limits Before You Are Upset**

In living life with young people, there are often times when everyone gets upset at the same time: a traffic jam that makes parents and children late for school and work, or an injury that happens to a family pet. At these times, it is hard to calmly and thoughtfully set a limit for a child who begins acting out, because the upset has overtaken everyone, including yourself.

But more often, we are in a situation where we have clues that the upset is coming. The most common mistake we adults make in this situation is waiting until we are irritated and off-track ourselves before we step in to address an unreasonable child. We parents know the signs that each of our children give when they are heading off track. We hear the minor protest in the back room that usually leads to a major fight in ten minutes. We know that a slam of the door coming home from afterschool care means that homework will be another battle tonight. But we continue doing the dishes, sorting the clothes, and getting other tasks done, in the false hope that tonight the fight won't happen, or tonight she'll sit down and do her homework.

It usually works better to begin listening at the first hint of impending upset. Everyone is more flexible at that point. Ten minutes of cuddling or hanging out or horsing around with the child who's on her way downhill can change the pattern of the next few hours entirely. It's the connection you make, the play and affection you offer, that invite your child out of her isolation and into the warmth you provide. Your child would much rather be in touch with you than on her way to another fight. But you'll have to take the initiative, and a little time, to refresh your connection with her before the crisis is in full swing.

## Setting Policy

Whether spoken or unspoken, each family has a set of policies, usually thought of as family rules, that govern its overall functioning. Most of us don't think much about the policies we've put into practice. They tend to be an invisible background to our relationships, an unspoken set of assumptions about how people should act, until something goes wrong.

What are the policies in your household? Here are some possible examples, mostly taken from the U.S. traditions of child rearing of a generation or two ago: "Parents decide and children obey." "Children should be seen and not heard." "If you question or complain about your punishment, you'll get more punishment." "Everyone eats at mealtime, hungry or not." These policies reflect an assumption that grownups know better and their judgment is more worthwhile than a child's.

All of my work and the work of others I respect points toward the need for a revolution in how children are treated by adults. The key insight is that if children are to grow up respecting themselves and others, they need to be treated with respect from infancy onward. Examples of policies which reflect good common sense and basic respect for children might be: "We let each other know what we like about each other at least once each day;" "We share the work of the household. Everyone has at least one job, and anyone can ask for help with that job to make it more fun;" "We don't hurt each other. When we see someone hurting someone else, we stop them."

It's helpful to have family meetings every now and then to clarify family policies, and to strategize together for those times that are most stressful. Under stress, both children and parents will forget to abide by good policy, but a strategy such as, "When Mommy begins to yell at you, you can tell her you love her," or, "When big brother is feeling upset, we won't leave him alone in the same room with little sister" can help guide tense people toward more reasonable, less hurtful actions. To build connections between family members, it's good to begin and to end such meetings with

each person saying what is going well for them, or what they like about another member of the family. Appreciation goes a long way to lift people's attention away from upset and toward the good moments in life.

Children need policy. They need to know that there are guidelines for reasonable behavior within the family. Children need to know that their parents will ensure that each person in the family is treated well. Children hunger for love, consideration and justice. The limits we set, and the listening we then do to repair our connections with our children bring love, limits, and good policy together.

Here's a short summary of the things to remember when setting limits with your child.

- Your child is good. She wants to be loving, cooperative, and close to you.
- When your child's behavior goes off track, it's because she's feeling disconnected. She's feeling hurt.
- When she feels hurt, she can't behave reasonably.
- Your kind, firm limits at this time are a real gift to your child.
- There's no need to attack an unreasonable or an emotional child. Children need warmth and closeness in order to change and heal.
- Listen, limit, then listen as your child's bad feelings come rolling off.

## *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-booklet set 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](http://www.handinhandparenting.org) or by calling **Hand in Hand** at 650 322-5323.