

# Parenting by Connection



*by Patty Wipfler*

# Parenting by Connection: Supporting and Empowering Parents

## The Situation for Parents

One of the best things about being a parent is the chance to love your child with all your heart. Words fail to describe how deeply and completely parents love their children. Every generation of parents tries hard to offer their children more appreciation, more respect, and a stronger foundation of confidence than they themselves experienced as children. Parents' love can be obscured by overwork, exhaustion, worry, or harsh circumstances, but you can count on finding it there as soon as the load is lifted.

**The work of parents is vital.** Children need love, security and confidence in their own goodness in order to make sense of the world around them. The tether of love that anchors a child is woven from warmth and understanding offered by his parents and caregivers. Every detail of every day in a child's life matters, and every effort a parent makes to understand and guide his child is worthwhile. The work of nurturing children involves one small interaction after another for hours on end. At day's end, parents often feel as though they've gotten nothing done, but an observer could count a hundred irreplaceable acts of caring the parent is too busy or too tired to remember. This vital work often fades to invisibility in the world at large, and in the eyes of the parent as well. But to the child, those daily acts of nurturing are a lifeline.

**The work of parenting deserves support.** Parents need others who know that they and their children are unique and good. When parents have others who can offer encouragement, appreciation, and help with the rough spots, they are much better able to enjoy their children and stay flexible as new parenting challenges arise.

**Under current conditions, parenting isn't easy.** Each father and mother brings both talents and personal challenges to the work of raising a child. Each person has their unique set of reactions to

the normal challenges of parenting—to sleep deprivation, messes, interruptions, emotional moments, and to the uncertainties of life with young children. In addition, children’s persistent efforts to get the attention they need can trigger parents’ feelings of frustration, anger, or exhaustion. These reactions can create big hurdles to the enjoyment of parenthood.

There are also societal conditions that make parenting a real challenge. No one prepares parents for the work of nurturing children, so it can be difficult to understand how to best respond to the messages a child’s behavior is sending. Most of the institutions that serve families—schools, medical systems, justice systems, towns and cities—are inadequate partners with parents in the work of nurturing children. In most communities, the needs of parents for information, support and respite go largely unmet. As their children venture toward the larger world around them, parents often feel a deep longing to make that world a better place.

## **Common Obstacles to Parent Leadership**

At the heart of the challenge for parents is the fact that *the important work of parents is not recognized as work*. Economically, parenting occupies almost the same niche as a hobby. No allowance is made for the time and security that parents need to nurture their children personally and well.

This lack of support for the work of parents exists across all boundaries of race, class background, and economic status, and is at the heart of many of the specific difficulties parents experience. The lack of recognition for the importance of parenting saps parents’ energy and makes it hard for them to believe that they do make a difference. Although they do absolutely vital work as they care for their children, parents often feel like they’re on a treadmill, getting nowhere day after day.

The lack of societal support for parenting almost guarantees that parents will experience the following obstacles to the enjoyment of motherhood and fatherhood:

**Isolation** Parenting is done largely without preparation, someone to learn from, or resource to call upon when the work becomes overwhelming. The myth that a parent ought to be able to handle it alone creates inevitable difficulties that parents may feel ashamed to talk about, increasing their isolation from possible assistance.

**Guilt** Parenting is done without the benefit of the perspective that much of parenting needs to be learned. When parents' learning tasks become difficult, they feel they have personally failed. These feelings of guilt complicate the learning process, and prevent parents from noticing their successes and enjoying their children.

**Confusion** Parents labor without enough information about the needs of young children, and receive much conflicting advice. Along with good information, they need ample support, for they are often working to break new ground by offering their children more respect and closeness than they remember receiving when they were young.

**Poverty of time** In order to keep a family fed and housed, parents must often sacrifice time spent with their family for time spent at paid work. The hurry, separation, sadness and stress that is so common in family life prevents parents and children from appreciating one another and enjoying relaxed times together.

**Exhaustion** Parents have twenty-four-hour responsibilities. When they become exhausted, most parents continue to work hard. But they lose the ability to make fresh decisions, relate well to others, and to rest. The exhaustion parents feel traps them and their families in repeated difficulties that do not resolve until the exhaustion is addressed.

**Poverty and racism** undermine the well-being of every family and community. In a world where resources abound, parents and young children lack basic protections against the damage that poverty and racism inflict. We see the effects of this systematic

neglect in every city and town. Although not every family is personally targeted, the fabric of our communities is frayed by these conditions and the vigor of our civil society is compromised. Parents and children were never meant to resign themselves to such deep inequities.

“**Hand in Hand’s** core commitment is to reach out to parents, bringing them the key listening, self-assessment and problem-solving skills they need to meet the challenges of parenting and lead their families well.”

## **Our Guiding Principle: Parents Are Good**

High regard for the efforts of parents is at the heart of our work. We base our work with parents on this foundation:

- **Parents are good.** They love their children deeply, and they want their children to have good lives.
- **Parents always try their very best: they will make great efforts to love and care well for their children.** What allows parents to keep going is appreciation, acceptance and having someone they can trust who will remain hopeful and supportive when times are hardest.
- **Parents treat their children with more kindness than they themselves received as children.** At a young age, people commit themselves to not repeating their parents’ mistakes. They succeed to a measurable degree, unless they are besieged by devastating circumstances.
- **While nurturing their children, parents deserve useful information, appreciation and support.** Parents also deserve help in handling stress, so they can learn from the challenges of parenting and enjoy their children fully.
- **When parents are well-supported, they take a natural interest in the well-being of all children, and their caring extends beyond their own families.**

Nurturing children eventually raises every issue critical to humankind. Learning to handle these issues well helps parents become thoughtful leaders whose work is centered in caring for their family and community.

“When I listen to other parents, I feel like I learn so much. I learn from them, but I also learn a lot about myself. Even during hard times, I always come away feeling like it’s good to be a parent.”

## **Our Approach: Parenting by Connection**

Parents and children are at their best when they feel close and connected. Our experience tells us that the ability to connect with respect and love is at the heart of healthy relationships between parents and children. When parents know how to connect and reconnect, a child can feel his parents’ love, regardless of his age or stage. This connection is at the root of children’s confidence and good judgment as they grow.

Parents, too, need supportive relationships. They need relationships with other adults that help them refuel their love, patience, and interest in learning. Parenting by Connection recognizes the innate desire of children and parents to be close to each other, and the power of listening to build and to restore that connection when it has been frayed by tension, upset, disappointment, or trauma.

## **Cornerstone Understandings**

- **Children are born to feel close and connected.** When children feel connected, they learn more readily, love more easily, and become true leaders among their peers.
- **Parents want to be close to their children.** They want to see their children thrive, help their children learn, and love their children fully.
- **Parents thrive when they have strong and valued relationships with other adults.** These relationships help parents recognize their own goodness and bring fresh thought and energy to their family life.

- **Feeling disconnected or stressed causes children’s behavior to flare. Children are starved for connection at these times.** When children’s behavior goes off track they are usually making a plea for closeness, connection and understanding. At these moments, children need a way to shed the emotional tension that has driven them astray. Once a child has had a good laugh, a tantrum, or a cry with the support of his parent, he can feel connected again, make thoughtful decisions and learn from his experience.
- **Feeling isolated or stressed causes parents’ behavior to flare. Parents are in need of connection at these times.** When emotional stress sends parents’ behavior off track, they need a supportive listener who appreciates how hard they try, and doesn’t judge them or the feelings they have.

## **Listening: The Key Strategy for Building Connection**

**Listening connects us.** The tools we employ in the Parenting by Connection approach are simple and available to everyone. They are based on the power of listening and sharing our stories with another trusted person. Listening conveys respect, and gives the listener a window into another person’s thinking and experience.

**Parents need someone to listen to them.** With so much good intention and so little help or support, mothers and fathers naturally have big feelings about their parenting work. In a respectful environment, parents can build the safety to show the feelings that lie close to their hearts. They also learn that other parents’ experience is not far from their own. Parents find that the chance to talk freely, to shed tension, to develop goals, and to feel a common bond helps them understand and guide their children well.

**Children need someone to listen to them.** When an infant is born, he brings with him a profound need for his parents to love him and listen to him. From birth onward, children are constantly communicating important information about their emotional and

physical needs. Parents win children's hearts when they work to understand their child's behavior, rather than simply trying to control it. A child's desire for his parents to be good listeners remains strong throughout childhood and adolescence.

We see connection as the organizing principle behind parenting, and we employ listening, parent-to-parent and parent-to-child, as the key strategy for building and renewing closeness. The Listening Tools we offer are reliable practices that help children feel safe and understood by their parents, and help parents build good support for themselves. As parents become adept at using Listening Tools to convey their caring, they feel better able to meet their children's core needs for connection, and their own.

"My six-year-old son, four-and-a-half-year-old daughter and I had stopped at a local establishment for lunch. My son got out of the car and closed the door, not noticing that his younger sister was also on the way out his door. She wasn't injured physically but was hurt by the insult of having the door slammed on her. She began to cry and cry. At first my son wanted to cast the blame on her and tell her that she shouldn't have come out his door. I stopped him by saying, 'She's really upset. Let's just listen to her about what happened right now.' I put an arm around her and he came close and together we gave her our attention while she cried.

"When she finished crying my son apologized to her instead of offering the lecture he initially wanted to offer. (I think listening to her cry helped him too!) She readily accepted his apology (which she won't typically do when she's hurting). They walked arm in arm into the restaurant while my son gently reminded his little sister that she should let him know when she's coming out his door so that it wouldn't happen again.

"For me, this is an especially powerful example for me of how listening to someone who is hurt can make way for clearer thinking, compassion, understanding and love on *both* sides."

# The Parenting by Connection Toolbox

We teach these Listening Tools to foster a healthy parent-child connection:

- **Special Time** An adult sets aside a distinct period of time — from five minutes to an hour — during which he will focus undivided attention on the child, doing whatever play the child chooses, within the limits of safety and reason. This basic tool helps a child feel that his parent is on his side, and that his ideas and interests are worthy. Special Time can both build and repair close parent-child connections.
- **Playlistening** The adult takes the less powerful role in play. The adult notices what allows the child to laugh (without being tickled), promotes the child's laughter and allows the child to explore play in the more powerful role. Laughter and fun build children's confidence and help parents feel close, too.
- **Setting Limits** The adult takes responsibility to stop behavior that is hurtful or thoughtless, without directing blame or hurtful actions toward the child. Or, the adult holds out a reasonable expectation, such as sitting in a car seat, without backing down and without angry or hurtful actions toward the child. When the child's feelings about the limit or the expectation erupt, the adult stays and offers closeness, because listening to his feelings will restore the child's ability to think clearly again. Together with Staylistening, this tool meets children's need to offload the feelings of upset that interfere with close connections and good judgment, while maintaining the limits and expectations they need to be their best.
- **Staylistening** The adult stays close to a child who is shedding emotions through crying, tantrums, trembling or raging. The adult listens and allows the child to express his feelings of hurt. At last, when the child is finished, he can feel the caring the adult has offered, and he can relax, learn, and play well again. This

tool restores children's sense of connection, hope and confidence after incidents of hurt, and preserves children's ability to learn in challenging situations.

- **Redirecting** When listening to a child's feelings isn't possible at the moment, the adult helps the child bring his attention away from the upset by offering a focus on an activity that's fun, engaging, or useful. This tool doesn't address the roots of the child's tension, but can be used as a short-term solution when time, safety and resource are in short supply. This tool helps children develop options for handling upsets in situations where they don't have the emotional support of the people around them.

We teach these Listening Tools to foster parents' leadership of their families:

- **Listening Partnerships** Two parents take turns respectfully listening to the thinking, efforts, goals and feelings of the other. (We recommend half-hour to one-hour turns, but any amount of time exchanged is a good start.) The listener gives no advice. Listening Partnerships give parents the chance to learn from their own experience and to notice and understand their own thoughts, feelings and goals. Listening Partnerships promote parent leadership at home and in the community by giving parents a regular opportunity to notice the best in themselves and in other parents.
- **Parent Support Groups** A group of parents gathers, exchanges updates on their lives, and then offers a measure of listening time to each member in turn. No advice is given, but the general principles of working to make good connections within the family provide an effective direction forward. A leader establishes confidentiality, and mentors parents as they use Listening Tools within their families. Parent Support Groups help parents develop a strong sense of respect for themselves and other parents, and create a base from which parents can take leadership in their families and beyond.

Although the Listening Tools of Parenting by Connection are simple, they are not always easy to use. Conventional wisdom in most cultures holds that outbursts of feelings are inappropriate behavior for children, rather than a natural and needed release of tension. Parents have been trained to try to control, lecture or punish the child who is upset. As is true in any effort to acquire more intentional behavior, learning to set limits without harshness and to listen to children's feelings can require support and encouragement over time.

Adults are also taught that they should keep a tight rein on their own feelings around other adults. The general atmosphere of disrespect for parents makes parents reluctant to let anyone outside the family know the difficulties they face. Learning to use a listener so that parental stress doesn't govern the family takes persistence and courage.

Grappling with these challenges is well worth the effort. Whenever parents can manage to use them, Listening Tools help them understand both themselves and their children better. The understandings parents gain as they listen and are listened to help them to take strides toward achieving what they most want—a healthy relationship with their children that will last a lifetime.

“As the parents of two teenage daughters who are still emotionally close to us and whose company we thoroughly enjoy, we constantly recall how important Listening Tools have been to our family. In teaching us how to listen to our children at their happiest and saddest moments, the moments when they learn the most about themselves, this approach has allowed our family to face challenges with grace and love.”

## **The Parenting by Connection Program for Parents**

Parents' leadership of their families can be built with four simple practices. Done regularly, these activities help to strengthen connections between family members and resolve stress. Some

parents can employ the full program right away. Most begin with just one practice at first, see the benefits, and then do more. A parent can start with any of the four practices.

**1. Parents give Special Time to their child/ren each week.**

To proactively build and maintain close parent-child connections, we recommend that parents try to do an hour per week. The hour might be divided into ten minutes each day with one child, or ten minutes a week with each of six children, or half an hour each with two children weekly. How Special Time is divided should show fairness to the children in the household—the parent decides on a sensible arrangement. Special Time lets each child know that you are eager to be close and are able to be guided by his judgment. This is deeply encouraging to children. Special Time can spearhead the resolution of tension within the family. It also gives an overworked parent the satisfaction of giving his undivided attention to each child on a regular basis. As the benefits of Special Time become clear, many parents decide to do more. It's a surprisingly powerful way to bring added warmth and hope into the family.

**2. Parents respond to a child's upsets with Staylistening once each week.** This is an "emergency response" tool. When a child's feelings of upset spill over into tears, tantrums, or fearful screams, we recommend that at least once a week, the parent set aside the other things he expected to get done, come close and listen. The parent may need to set a reasonable limit—require that the child sit in the car seat, or say "no" to that second cookie. With the parent close, the child cries, storms or tantrums until he feels better. His need to offload emotional tension is met with compassion and respect, so afterward, feeling close again, the child is often able to make noticeable gains in confidence and awareness. Once a week is a good beginning for the use of a tool that is deeply beneficial to both parents and children.

**3. Parents arrange a Listening Partnership every week.**

A Listening Partnership gives parents much needed time to

think about their work as parents. It also becomes a time to safely express some of the emotional tensions that arise from loving children so deeply, and having too little resource. It connects two parents in listening and caring, and both come to feel better supported and understood.

- 4. Parents arrange at least one hour of Special Time for themselves once a week.** This is a reminder to parents that it's vital to set aside time to focus on non-parenting goals, to pursue adult relationships, and to do the things they love. When parenting has engulfed a person so completely that he can't think of anything that would feel like fun, the time is especially ripe for some grownup Special Time. This practice is important for the long-range health of the family. Setting up grownup Special Time also motivates parents to develop a childcare support system, which broadens their family's ties to others in the community.

This four-point program is a simple framework for addressing the core needs of parents and children for connection, play and stress release.

## **Strategies for empowerment**

### **For parents**

**Parenting by Connection empowers parents in a basic, straightforward way.** Parents learn to work together respectfully, in pairs or small groups. Hearing other parents' successes and seeing problems resolve creates a can-do atmosphere in which parents' confidence builds. The relationships one develops through Listening Partnerships and Parent Resource Groups also serve as an emotional safety net for those times when circumstances within the family are challenging.

We have noticed that when parents use Listening Tools, they move forward on a continuum of parent leadership that ranges from learning to manage the nurturing of a newborn to leading

community groups toward common goals. As each parent learns from his own experience, his listening partners learn as well. Their listening exchanges serve as incubators for the skills and understandings that move each parent forward.

“The confident and resilient parent is not the parent who has all the answers. It’s the one who knows what a child needs at critical moments, the moments that put us on the spot.”

## For professionals working with parents and children

The Parenting by Connection approach also benefits professionals who work with parents and children. From a foundation of respect, Parenting by Connection offers a balanced set of tools for earning parents’ trust, supporting parents’ growth, improving the lives of children, and being strong allies for families.

Those who work with families care deeply about the work they do. They often work in highly stressful situations, facing the many unmet needs of parents and children on a daily basis. Listening Tools are immediately applicable to their interactions with parents and children, and can be used as a strategy for improving communication within their organization. In addition, those who have learned the Parenting by Connection approach are often excited about the results it brings within their own families.

**Hand in Hand** offers training in Parenting by Connection for professionals and agencies. Our classes and support groups provide ongoing support and mentoring in the use of Listening Tools, and our web site, articles, e-newsletter, and literature are a rich resource for parents and professionals alike.

“I have had a parent support group running in North County for seven years now! Some of the parents have been with it that long. I learned so much from the training I took with you. It gave me the foundation I needed to communicate respect and meet parents’ needs.”

## Listening Tools: One Parent's Experience

Here is how one parent used the Listening Tools (Listening Partnerships and Staylistening) to help her daughter make a significant learning breakthrough:

“My daughter Shamika was given a month to learn the fifty U.S. states and their capitals. I knew she would need some help with this. I offered to help her learn groups of about six states at a time, so that she could spread the memorization out and not get too overwhelmed.

“After she memorized the first six she felt she couldn't possibly learn all the capitals. She became upset, and she had a huge cry. I stayed with her and listened to everything. I told her I thought she could do it, but mostly, I listened. A few days later, she memorized the second set of six states and capitals, but again at the end of it, she felt that all fifty was too much for her. I listened to her while she had another long cry. It was hard to keep listening. She was saying, ‘I'll never learn this. I just can't do it!’ over and over. She also got mad at me for trying to help, and cried hard about my ‘interference.’

“After that evening, even though I know by now that crying helps children overcome hurt feelings, I was somewhat confused. I wondered if I actually had gotten too involved in this assignment. It's hard to help my children when they get mad at me for it! And I'm a single mother, so there's no one else at home to check with, or to hand her off to if I bottom out. I had a regular Listening Partnership coming up, so I took my feelings and my worries there, and used my listening time to work through my upset. The best I could figure after working things through was that I needed to stay confident for her, and needed to keep listening. I hoped the process would work.

“In a few days, I told her it was time to memorize some more capitals, and Shamika felt hopeless again about learning them all, and had a third big cry. Each cry she had went on for half an hour or more. She felt she could never do the assignment, and each time, she expressed frustration and anger at me, at the assignment, and at the world. I kept listening, and now and then I would tell her I thought she was smart enough to do it. But I didn’t try to talk her out of how badly she was feeling. Again, I took my worry and frustration to my Listening Partnership, and kept wondering how this was all going to turn out.

“After her third cry, everything changed! She learned the next sets of capitals quickly and easily. One day, she took on a set of eighteen states and capitals, and did them all at once. Three days before the test, she asked me to quiz her on them, and she knew them all! She was ecstatic, and I think she was amazed that she had done something she was sure she could never do. She was so proud of herself.

“The day before the test, she was completely confident that she would get 100%, and she was actually looking forward to the test! Shamika is usually very anxious about tests—I’d never seen her like this before. After the test was over, she told me she was sad that it was over. She wished she could do it again! She has referred to learning the capitals again and again as one of the major learning feats of her life, and she thanked me profusely for my help with the project, saying that she never could have done it without me.

“She cried her hopelessness away, and then she excelled. It was absolutely great to see this whole process work! Thank heavens for Listening Partnerships. I couldn’t have stayed supportive to her without a good listener for me.”

## *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.