



# Cooperative and Connected

Helping children flourish  
without punishments or rewards

*Aletha J. Solter, Ph.D.*

ALSO BY ALETHA J. SOLTER, PH.D.

*The Aware Baby*

*Tears and Tantrums*

*Raising Drug-Free Kids*

*Attachment Play*

# Cooperative and Connected

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Aletha J. Solter, PH.D.

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*“If we are to attain real peace in this world,  
we will have to begin with the children.”*

*—Gandhi*



# Contents

Preface to the New Edition .....	xix
Introduction .....	3
<b>1. Tears and Tantrums .....</b>	<b>7</b>
Why do children continue to cry after they have learned how to talk? .....	7
Is there research evidence that crying is beneficial? .....	9
What do children need to cry about? .....	10
What should I do when my child cries? .....	13
What about temper tantrums? .....	16
Why do children cry and rage about insignificant things? ...	18
If I accept my child's tantrums, won't they occur more frequently? .....	21
What if my child has a tantrum in public? .....	22
What if children suppress their crying? .....	23
How can I help my child regain the ability to cry? .....	25
What if I find it difficult to accept my child's crying? .....	27
Is it okay for me to cry in front of my child? .....	29
Exercises .....	30
<b>2. Fears and Frights .....</b>	<b>31</b>
What causes children's fears? .....	31
What fears are the most common? .....	35
How should I react when my child expresses a fear? .....	37
What does research tell us about overcoming fears? .....	38
How can I help my child overcome fears? .....	39
What about fears of unknown origin? .....	44
What causes nightmares and night terrors? .....	47
What about separation anxiety past the age of two? .....	49
Exercises .....	54

<b>3. Living and Learning</b> .....	55
What kinds of experiences are beneficial for young children? .....	55
Should young children be exposed to violence? .....	58
How can I answer my child's questions about death? .....	59
How can I give my child information about sexuality? .....	61
How can I minimize the effect of sexism and gender stereotypes? .....	63
What can I do at home to help my child become a good learner? .....	66
How can I help my child learn to read? .....	70
What kind of school is best for young children? .....	72
What is the effect of screen-based activities on young children? .....	74
Exercises .....	78
<b>4. Playing and Pretending</b> .....	81
What and how do children learn through play? .....	81
What kinds of play are therapeutic? .....	86
What is the meaning of imaginary playmates and superhero fantasies? .....	88
What about play that appears to be senseless and foolish? .....	90
What kinds of toys are best? .....	91
Should I let my child play with guns and other war toys? ...	93
How can I be a helpful participant in my child's play? .....	97
What if I become bored while playing with my child? ....	100
How can I minimize the importance of winning, and what about children who cheat? .....	102
Exercises .....	106



<b>5. Conflicts and Challenges</b> . . . . .	107
What are the effects of punishment? . . . . .	107
What about rewards? . . . . .	109
What causes children's behavior problems? . . . . .	111
How can I prevent behavior problems? . . . . .	113
What if my child and I have a conflict of needs? . . . . .	115
How can I provide information to prevent behavior problems? . . . . .	119
How can I deal with behavior problems caused by stress or unhealed trauma? . . . . .	123
I sometimes hurt my child in anger. What can I do about this? . . . . .	128
How can I get my child to help with household chores? . . .	130
What can I do about bedtime and naptime problems? . . . .	132
Exercises . . . . .	135
 <b>6. Friends and Foes</b> . . . . .	 137
How can I prepare my child for a new baby? . . . . .	137
What can I do about my child's resentment of a new baby? . . . . .	139
Why do siblings fight with each other? . . . . .	143
How can I intervene when my children fight with each other? . . . . .	146
How can I remain objective when my children fight? . . . . .	150
How can I help my child learn to get along with friends? . . . . .	151
How can I protect my child from sexual abuse? . . . . .	153
What about children's sex play with each other? . . . . .	156
How can I help my stepchild adjust to me? . . . . .	158
Exercises . . . . .	161

<b>7. Eating and Ailments</b> .....	163
What can I do about eating problems? .....	163
How can I implement the self-demand feeding approach? .....	166
What about candy? .....	168
What if my child uses food to suppress emotions? .....	170
How can I deal with behavior problems during mealtimes? .....	173
I have been told that my child has ADHD. What can I do to help him? .....	175
How can I help my child cope with dental and medical procedures? .....	178
How can I help my child deal with physical pain? .....	181
How can I help my child during a trip to the emergency room? .....	183
How can I help my child through a stay in the hospital? . . .	184
Exercises .....	188
 <b>Conclusion</b> .....	 191
Major themes in this book .....	191
Hope for the future .....	193
References and Suggestions for Further Reading .....	195
About the Author .....	207
What Is Aware Parenting? .....	209

## List of Charts

Sources of stress for young children . . . . .	12
Suggestions of what to say to a crying child . . . . .	14
Comparison between distorted anger and healthy anger release . . . . .	17
Factors contributing to children's fears . . . . .	35
How to help children overcome fears . . . . .	44
Reasons for unusually strong separation anxiety past the age of two . . . . .	53
Factors that help children become competent learners . . . . .	69
The three major functions of play . . . . .	87
Recommended forms of parent/child play (attachment play) . . .	99
How to minimize competition at home . . . . .	103
Three reasons for behavior problems . . . . .	113
Tips for preventing behavior problems . . . . .	115
The three components of an I-message . . . . .	117
Tips for family meetings . . . . .	119
Stages of development for understanding information . . . . .	120
How to give information to children . . . . .	122
Behaviors that can be caused by stress or unhealed trauma . . . .	123
Two ways to deal with aggressive or disruptive behavior . . . . .	128
Tips for encouraging children to help with household chores . .	132
Factors contributing to sibling rivalry . . . . .	146
How to do mediation with children . . . . .	148
Three ways to intervene when two children want the same toy . . . . .	149
Parenting practices that can interfere with children's healthy food choices . . . . .	165
How to help a child through a stay in the hospital . . . . .	187
Summary of major points . . . . .	193



## Tears and Tantrums

THIS CHAPTER FOCUSES on the reasons for crying and the most helpful way to respond to children's tears and tantrums. Many books for parents consider crying and temper tantrums to be behavior problems that should be discouraged. This chapter offers a different perspective and describes the benefits of crying. I have covered this topic first because this information is important for understanding the rest of the book.

### **Why do children continue to cry after they have learned how to talk?**

You may wonder why your child continues to burst into tears at times, even when she is old enough to express her feelings and needs with words. When she was a baby, you accepted her crying because she didn't know how to talk. You knew that crying was a major form of communication, and you responded in an effort to meet her needs.

Crying is indeed a baby's way of communicating, and that is *one* of the reasons why babies cry. But there is a second, less recognized, reason for crying. It is common for babies to cry even after all of their immediate needs have been filled. Perhaps your baby had crying spells in the late afternoon or early evening, and you couldn't figure out what she needed or how to comfort her. This kind of crying, sometimes called "colic," often worries parents because nothing they do seems effective. There appears to be no way to make the baby happy.

Crying without any obvious cause typically peaks at about six weeks after birth, and this crying is now considered a normal stage of development. It does not necessarily imply that the baby is suffering from physical pain. In fact, much of this crying may even be a beneficial tension release mechanism.

Research studies have found correlations between early stress and crying. The more stress babies experience, the more they cry. For example, babies who had a difficult birth cry more than babies whose births were less complicated. Babies who continue to cry while being held (and after all immediate needs have been met), may be healing from past distressing experiences such as birth trauma. Overstimulation is another source of stress that can cause a need to cry. It's hard to believe that babies have stressful lives, but babies are extremely vulnerable, and they can be easily overwhelmed or even traumatized, even with the best of parenting. For stressed babies, crying functions as a natural stress-release mechanism. (See my book, *The Aware Baby* for a detailed description of stress-release crying during infancy.)

The communication function of crying is gradually replaced by language. Toddlers learn to ask for food when they are hungry, and they learn to say "too cold" when the bath water is too cold. However, stress-release crying is *not* replaced by talking. Children continue to cry in order to recover from sad, frightening, disappointing, frustrating, or overwhelming experiences. Even though older children may verbalize their feelings (for example, "I'm sad that Daddy didn't come home in time for my birthday party"), they may still need to cry in order to recover fully from distressing experiences.

The meaning and purpose of crying have been greatly misunderstood. Many parenting books include crying and tantrums in chapters about discipline, along with other behaviors such as hitting, biting, swearing, lying, and stealing. This negative view of crying is unfortunate, because crying and raging are actually beneficial stress-release mechanisms, which allow children to maintain or restore emotional health. In fact, crying and tantrums may actually help *prevent* the "misbehaviors" with which they are so often listed.

Many parents discover that their children become more cooperative and less aggressive after a good cry.

Another mistaken notion equates crying with hurting, and you may assume that your child will feel better if she would only stop crying. You may therefore think that you will do your child a favor by helping her to stop crying. In reality, however, crying is the process of becoming *unhurt and unstressed*. Children will continue to feel upset and stressed if their crying is cut short. Our role as parents is not to stop our children from crying, but to love and support them so they can fully release their painful emotions.

### **Is there research evidence that crying is beneficial?**

Researchers first became interested in crying back in the 1970's. These early studies found reduced tension after psychotherapy sessions in which clients cried, compared to a control group of people who exercised for an equivalent period of time. The indications of tension reduction included lower blood pressure, pulse rate, and body temperature, as well as more synchronized brain-wave patterns.

In the 1980's, a biochemist named William Frey researched the chemical content of human tears and found differences between emotional tears (during real crying) and those caused by an irritant such as a cut onion. The emotional tears had higher concentrations of substances related to our physiological stress response (such as ACTH and catecholamines). He suggested that the purpose of emotional tears is to remove these substances from the body, just as we remove waste products by urinating and defecating. If these substances were not eliminated, they would maintain the body in a state of tension and hyperarousal. If that condition became chronic, it could lead to stress-related illnesses. Frey suggested that we may increase our susceptibility to a variety of physical and psychological problems when we suppress our tears.

Researchers have found evidence for psychological as well as physical benefits of crying. It counteracts the stress response through activation of the parasympathetic nervous system, and it is recognized as an effective mood enhancer. Studies have shown

In addition to these various sources of stress during the early childhood years, many children have accumulated painful feelings resulting from unhealed stress or trauma during infancy. Our bodies store the memory of our earliest experiences, especially traumatic ones, even though we may not be able to put those memories into words. If your child had a difficult birth, early medical interventions, or a traumatic separation from you, he may have behavior problems later on, which are unrelated to any current source of stress. Babies can heal from these early traumas soon after they occur, but if you didn't have information about how to help your child heal when he was an infant, you can help him now. It's never too late to help your child heal from past trauma.

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### **Sources of stress for young children**

- **Hurts by commission**  
Ex: abuse, punishment, criticism, humiliation, bullying
  - **Hurts by omission (unmet needs)**  
Ex: lack of love, attention, stimulation, autonomy, respect, or time for play
  - **Situational hurts**  
Ex: illness, injury, parental divorce, birth of a sibling, new school
  - **Unhealed trauma from infancy**  
Ex: birth trauma, medical intervention, separation from parents
-



## What should I do when my child cries?

You can help and support your distressed child even when you don't know why she is crying. The first step is to remove any obvious source of pain or fright and to fill immediate needs. If another child is hitting her, take steps to stop the aggressive behavior. If she is screaming at the sight of a dog, calmly move her away from the animal. If she hasn't had a turn on the slide, let her have a turn if time permits. After you have done everything possible to make your child feel safe and meet her needs, she may continue to cry. If she does, the most helpful response is to accept the crying without trying to stop it.

It's possible that you were not allowed to cry enough as a child. Your well-meaning, but misinformed, parents may have distracted, punished, or ignored you when you cried. Perhaps you were stopped kindly ("there, there, don't cry") or with a threat ("if you don't stop crying, I'll *give* you something to cry about"). Maybe your parents offered you food, thinking that you were hungry ("have a cookie, it will make you feel better"). If your first impulse is to eat something when you feel anxious or depressed, this craving could be caused by the fact that your parents often fed you when you cried. Perhaps you were sent to your room when you cried or praised for being "good" when you did not cry.

In many cultures, parents tend to be more accepting of their daughters' tears than those of their sons. You may have heard your parents say "big boys don't cry." Many boys learn very early in life to "act like a man" and stop expressing feelings of pain, fear, or sadness. Unfortunately, children tend to enforce these gender stereotypes with each other by teasing boys who cry easily. Researchers have found that, as early as age four, boys tend to cry slightly less than girls during a venipuncture procedure, even though the boys' heart rate increases just as much as that of girls.

When parents use distractions, disapproval, or punishment to stop children from crying, the children learn that their painful emotions are not acceptable, and they begin to repress them in order to please their parents. Unfortunately, when children repeatedly hold back their tears, they eventually lose touch with their

## Exercises

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### Explore your childhood

1. What did your parents usually do when you cried as a child? Did they yell, punish, distract, ignore, or comfort? What words did they use? How did they react when you had a temper tantrum?
2. Did you ever see your parents cry? What were the occasions? How did it make you feel?
3. Do you recall a traumatic event from your childhood that you still need to cry about?

### Express your feelings about your child

1. How do you feel when your child cries? What do you feel like doing? (This isn't necessarily what you *should* do.)
2. How do you feel when your child has a temper tantrum?
3. Does your child repress his crying with a control pattern (special blanket, thumb sucking, bottle, etc.)? How do you feel about this behavior?

### Nurture yourself

1. Try to become aware of your own control patterns (repressing mechanisms). When you feel stressed, anxious, or depressed, do you distract yourself with social media, food, alcohol, drugs, or other habits? What do you really need at those times?
2. With your spouse or a friend, take turns listening to each other for five or ten minutes each, while you share the upsets of your day. Find someone who is willing to listen to you during emotional upsets. Join a support group or find a therapist who encourages you to cry.
3. Watch a sad movie and allow yourself the freedom of tears.

## **Fears and Frights**

MOST YOUNG CHILDREN have some fears. Parents often feel concerned about these fears and wonder what to do. This chapter describes different kinds of fears and the various factors that can cause them. It includes recommendations for helping children overcome anxiety and specific phobias. The two final sections cover the topics of nightmares and separation anxiety.

### **What causes children's fears?**

Fears are evident from birth on. Loud noises and sudden movements can easily startle newborn infants. During the second half of the first year, most babies develop separation anxiety and a fear of strangers, which usually indicate a healthy attachment to the parents. These fears normally decrease between two and eight years of ages, but new fears often emerge during those years. Children's fears during early childhood fall into two major categories: developmental and traumatic. Developmental fears result from immaturity, while traumatic fears stem from distressing events.

### ***Developmental fears***

Several factors contribute to children's developmental fears. A fear of being alone in the dark may have had survival value in prehistoric times and be wired into children's brains through the process of natural selection. Young children who strongly resisted being left alone at night probably received more protection from their mothers and were therefore less likely to die from exposure to the cold or attack by an animal.



## References and Suggestions for Further Reading

The scientific references in this section provide research evidence for the facts presented in this book. I have organized them according to the topics within each chapter. The suggestions for further reading include books of interest to people who wish to pursue these topics in greater depth. I have selected books that contain useful information and that are fairly consistent with the approach described in this book. Please note, however, that some of the advice in these books is not totally compatible with my approach.

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