

# RESOURCE GUIDE

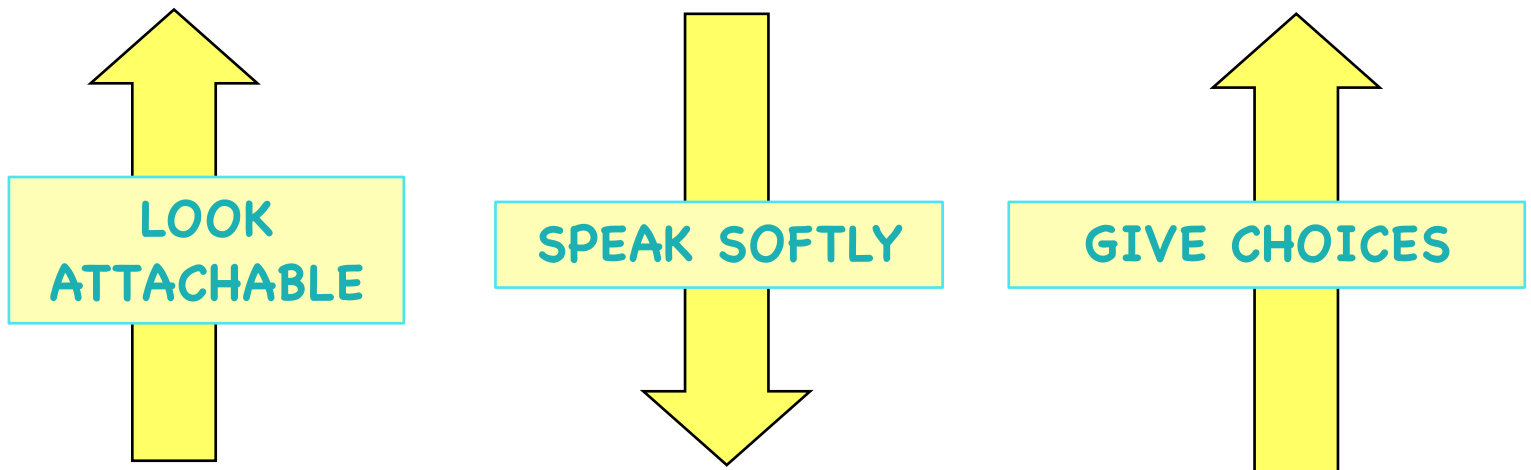
## UNDERSTANDING THE **EMOTIONAL** WORLD OF OUR CHILDREN IN COVID TIMES: HOW IT AFFECTS THEIR BEHAVIOUR AND WHAT WE CAN DO TO HELP THEM

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## THREE-PRONGED APPROACH TO HANDLING COUNTERWILL



**ATTACHMENT < COERCION > EMERGENCE**

- Collect before directing
- Strengthen the relationship
- Deepen the attachment

- Refrain from using a commanding voice
- Refrain from focusing on SHOULDs, MUSTs & HAVE TOs
- Use as little force and leverage as possible
- Back off until you get a better attachment hold
- Use structures and routines to orchestrate behavior

- Provide some sense of choice
- Focus on the child's will
- Allow the child's initiative & involvement
- Place in charge if possible



## **The Surprising Secret Behind Kid's Resistance and Opposition**

**by Dr. Deborah MacNamara**

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Why is it that young children can lock down in protest at the mere suggestion of getting dressed or undressed? Why do school-age kids seem to resist directions and expectations when homework needs to get done? Why do some teens oppose and rail against rules and limits around technology use, driving them to push back at parents? At first glance, these scenarios seem unrelated ... except for their capacity to ignite parental frustration and persistence. But they all share similar roots.

Kids come with an instinct to resist and oppose, or do the opposite of what they are told but this isn't news to parents or teachers. What may be surprising is that resistance can stem from the counterwill instinct that is innate to all humans.

The term 'counterwill' was first coined in the German language by Otto Rank, a Viennese psychoanalyst and student of Freud's. This construct was further developed by Dr. Gordon Neufeld, using the lenses of attachment and development.

Counterwill refers to the instinct to resist, counter, and oppose when feel controlled or coerced. You can feel it arise inside of you when someone tells you want to think, do, or feel. This isn't a mistake or a flaw in human nature, and, like all instincts, serves an important function. The challenge for parents is that immaturity makes a child more prone to expressions of resistance.

Counterwill is an innate response designed to protect the self when feeling coerced or when facing separation. Children are designed to be directed by people they are attached to – which makes them prone to resist people who they are not connected to. If a stranger starts to tell a child what to do, they should be resistant to their directions. Not just anyone was meant to 'boss' a child around. This is a good thing, and preserves a parent's natural place in a child's life as being the one to care for them.

Why do kids resist parents they are attached to, though? The answer is because our 'have to's' have become greater than the child's 'want-to's.' In other words, their instinct to resist has become greater than their desire to follow – which could be due to the amount of control or coercion they are experiencing, a reflection of the depth of their attachment to a parent, or their level of immaturity. A child's resistance doesn't mean we have to abandon our agenda, but it does mean we will need to figure out how to hold on to our relationship while steering through the counterwill impasse.

The counterwill instinct is also important in helping pave the way for separate functioning and becoming a unique self. Part of figuring out who you are involves placing a moratorium on other people's views, agenda's, wants, and wishes. When other people's voices are louder than your own, the counterwill instinct helps to create some space through resistance so that you can develop your own perspective. While it may be problematic for parents to be resisted, it can serve an important developmental role in helping a child develop their own mind.

Counterwill responses in kids are not confined to the home and occur to other adults like teachers. The younger and more immature a child is, the more important a working relationship with their teacher will be in order to learn from them.

Attachment is what opens a child's ears to real and lasting influence – not coercion, bribes, threats, rewards, or punishment.

The more responsible a parent feels to lead a child and to care for them, the more provocative acts of resistance and defiance can seem. It is sometimes challenging for parents not to react out of their own counterwill instinct when their children are locked into resistance.

What is true is that the more you push a child who is resistant, the more they can push back and exhibit greater opposition. This can lead to an escalation of tension and conflict that erodes your relationship – ironically exactly what is required to render resistance less prevalent in the first place. Constant battles can create insecurity and anxiety in kids and can adversely impact their development.

The challenge is not to take resistance personally and even expect it. The challenge is to remain in the caretaker position and lead through the counterwill storm. Some of the strategies below require maturity in the parent and the capacity to see the big picture. It is relationship that opens a child's heart to being influenced by us and serves to create the ideal conditions for development.

So what are you supposed to do when your young child refuses to get dressed, or when your child refuses to do homework or obey technology rules?

### **1. Focus on connection first.**

What makes a child amenable to following a parent is connection. Before we direct them, we need to get into relationship by collecting them – that is, catching their eyes, getting a smile, focusing on what they are attending to – all before proceeding with our requests. If we need to talk about something that isn't working, like homework time, then it is best to collect them first to make them amenable to influence.

### **2. Reduce coercion when directing.**

Sometimes when we make requests of our kids we are talking in a coercive manner to counter their resistance before it begins. Statements like, "You have to ..." or "You must ..." or "You need to ..." all serve to raise the counterwill instinct. Consequences are also commonly used to get a child to comply, with statements such as, "You need to do this, or else," which only exacerbates a child's resistance.

### **3. Press pause, side-step, and revisit the issue when in better attachment.**

If you are locked into a counterwill battle with a child, then it is often better to take a tactical retreat to prevent wounding to the relationship and to avoid using force to get a child to capitulate to your demands. It is also important to maintain an alpha position in doing so. For example, "I'm going to give you some time to think about this and I will be back to talk," or "I've decided this is not a good time to address this issue."

### **4. Make some room for their own ideas and initiative.**

If a child is old enough to get dressed or organize their homework, then perhaps it is time to put them in charge of these things? If they are eager to have their own mind and exert their own wishes and wants, then carving some spaces and turning over age-appropriate tasks to them may be a helpful strategy. The types of activities that you would not want to turn over to them would include anything to do with their caretaking such as food, or who they spend time with.



**5. Make amends when needed.**

If our reactions to a child's counterwill have created distance in the relationship, then giving it time and returning to the child to make amends may be necessary. It can be simply done with an apology and an indication that you wish things would have gone better in the discussion.

While our children may claim, "You're not the boss of me," we don't have to take it to heart or react to it. We just need to lead through the counterwill storm, knowing we are their best bet and that they should feel safe and secure in our care. It is okay for our kids to have their own mind, but this doesn't mean they will always get their own way. One day the child will be the 'boss' of him or herself and until our job is done, we need to make some room for them to flex their wings, but not let go of our caretaking responsibilities.

For more information on dealing with counterwill in kids, please see the **Making Sense of Counterwill** course through the Neufeld Institute, and read Chapter 9 in *Rest, Play, Grow: Making Sense of Preschoolers* (or anyone who acts like one).

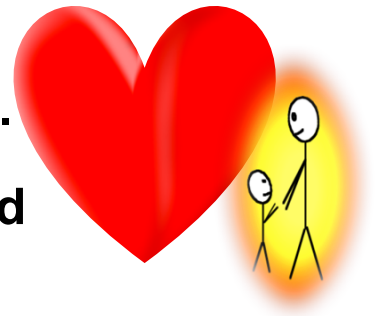
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**Dr. Deborah MacNamara** is the author of *Rest, Play, Grow: Making Sense of Preschoolers (or anyone who acts like one)*, is on faculty at the Neufeld Institute, and Director of **Kid's Best Bet**, a counselling and family resource center. For more information please see [www.macnamara.ca](http://www.macnamara.ca) and [www.neufeldinstitute.org](http://www.neufeldinstitute.org).

# PLAY WITH THEM

Playing with children increases attachment - eyes, smiles, nods, bring a child into our orbit.

The mutual joy and shared communication and attunement that adults and children can experience during play regulate the body's stress response.



- **PLAY TIME SHOULD NOT BE EARNED**– it should be scheduled and protected.
- **The more the child is IN TROUBLE, THE MORE HE/SHE NEEDS PLAY TIME.**

## ➤ **Singing and music**

- ❖ **Happy, Sad, Mad, Excited**

## ➤ **Dancing**

- ❖ **Slow, Fast, Happy, Sad, Mad, Excited**

## ➤ **Miming and Dress-up**

- ❖ **Being scary – being scared**
- ❖ **Being a monster – super hero**

## ➤ **Drawing**

- ❖ **All kinds - lots of emotion**

## ➤ **Play fighting**

## ➤ **Building and Imagining**

## ➤ **Jumping and destroying**





### As students return to our classrooms they are going to be full of emotion – and we can help them find release

As our elementary students head back to school during this turbulent time, there will be many emotions stirred up in them. Alarm. Frustration. Worry. Excitement.

And this will be mirrored by what we, as educators, may also be experiencing. On top of what we may be emotionally experiencing ourselves, we are being called to be the caring leaders that guide our students to a place where they can learn together. We all know that this going to be challenging. Very challenging.

We need to expect that our students will be arriving to us with their emotions stirred up. And we know that when emotions get stirred up, they need somewhere to go. Finding healthy ways to pre-emptively channel this emotional energy for our students can help to alleviate dangerous or disruptive eruptions in our classrooms.

Understandably, the last thing we may feel like is doing is planning for how to help our students to release emotion. We are already planning the many changes to our physical space, health regulations, and how we will learn together. And yet, if we do make plans for how to help our students to release the alarm and frustration whirling inside of them, they are going to cope better – and we are going to cope better.

### So, what can we do?

This is not the time for anything complicated. We need simple and easy activities that can help kids to release some of what is inside of them.

**We can make sure to provide a release activity every day.** This can be especially helpful for supporting students to get out frustration before it leads to outbursts of aggression. These outlets can also help students to reflect on and express their feelings in natural ways that don't make them feel self-conscious. Some general ideas for helping kids to release the emotion inside of them are:

- playing and/or listening to music
- physical movement
- stories or storytelling
- journaling
- poetry
- drama
- art – even free style doodling!
- simply being outdoors

Below are three activities from the Inside-Out Handbook; the companion guide to the book *Reclaiming Our Students: Why Children Are More Anxious, Aggressive, and Shut Down than Ever – and What We Can Do About It*

These activities can help your students:

- **GET IT OUT** by releasing pent-up physical and emotional energy. This is especially helpful for supporting them to release frustration that can lead to outbursts of aggression in class.
- **FEEL** by reflecting on and expressing their feelings in a safe way. This helps them to build consciousness around their feelings, which is essential for them to develop impulse control, emotional maturity, and resilience, as well as embark on a path of self-discovery.
- **CARE AND CONNECT** by awakening caring feelings while in safe spaces to be themselves and express their individuality. By offering our students experiences that support them to express their own individuality, while also becoming more attuned to others around them, we can help them not only appreciate what they have in common with each other but also build respect for difference. As a result, their sense of empathy can awaken, and more inclusive and caring communities may be the fruit of these experiences.

*These release activities can be facilitated while maintaining social distancing practices.* You can facilitate these same activities often as children will enjoy engaging in them as part of their daily routines. If you are looking for new activities to try, you can go to [reclaimingourstudents.com](http://reclaimingourstudents.com)

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## Release activity #1: Scribble Time!



### What age groups does this work for?

This is a great activity for kids ages four to eleven.

### What do you need to make it happen?

- one large piece of paper per student
- one dark pencil crayon per student (note: wax crayons tend to break when scribbling hard, so pencil crayons are best)
- fast-paced music

### How do you do it?

- Give each child a large piece of paper and a dark pencil crayon.
- Tell them that they get to scribble as hard and as fast as they can—but they can only scribble when the music starts! And when the music stops, they have to FREEZE!
- During the exercise, stop and start the music repeatedly at varying intervals, so that students can't anticipate when they will have to freeze.
- Once done, you can make a scribble wall and hang all the scribbles up. Or after everyone is done, each person crumples their scribbles into a ball and throws them into the recycling.

### What's the benefit?

Scribbling is such a natural thing to do when one has pent up energy that many kids often do this on the side and edges of their schoolwork on their own. This activity harnesses this natural tendency to scribble but increases and enhances the release experience.

Telling them they have to scribble and can't stop until the music does empties more stores of physical energy. And having music on during the experience can increase the emotional energy they direct into it. In this way, when they are done scribbling, they often have nothing left. And on top of it, boy, can it feel good to be given permission to draw messy and fast and to not worry about it!

### Helpful tips

This activity works best if the music you select has a lot of energy and is almost frenzied. Think big music, strong emotions—opera! Drums! Bees buzzing!

### Music suggestion:

Title: The Four Seasons—Summer in G Minor, RV. 315: 111 Presto

Artist: Adrian Chandler, featuring La Serenissima

Album: The Four Seasons & Concertos for Bassoon and Violin “in tromba marina”

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## Release activity #2: Drawing the Music

### What age groups does this work for?

This is a great activity for kids ages four to eighteen.

### What do you need to make it happen?

- one crayon or pencil crayon per person
- one large piece of paper per person
- music (see below for music suggestions)
- masking tape (optional)



### How do you do it?

- Give each child a large piece of paper and a crayon or pencil crayon. It is best to give each student only one crayon or pencil crayon, so that they can focus on listening to the music in this activity and allowing it to guide their drawing.
- Explain to your students that they are going to “draw the music.” Tell them that they get to draw how the music sounds and feels to them. It doesn’t matter what their drawing looks like at all! They can simply scribble, let their hand move solely to the beat and volume of the music, or they can draw specific things—it is entirely up to them. I often say to my students, “Imagine that I can’t hear anything at all, but just by looking at your paper, I can see what the music sounds and feels like to you!”
- It also helps to give students cues that help them connect what they hear to what they feel and therefore what they draw. For example, maybe as the music goes faster, they might want to draw faster. Or when the music becomes louder, they might want to make their drawings bigger! Or if the music sounds like dots to them, they can make dots all over their page. There is no right or wrong way to draw the music!

### Modifications for ages nine and up

- For students nine and up, you can add to the experience by having them close their eyes.
- For those students who are not comfortable closing their eyes, you can suggest that they look up, rather than down at their paper, or they can try mostly closing their eyes.
- It is also a good idea to turn off all bright lights, close the curtains, or dim the lights to help students focus less on what they see.
- If possible, it is a good idea to use masking tape to secure paper to each student’s desk, so they can feel the edges of their paper with their hands, rather than relying on their eyes.

### What’s the benefit?

This exercise supports students to connect to their feelings and experience release, as it does not ask them to think about drawing a specific thing, or even try to draw a specific thing. Instead, students have permission to be led by the music and to simply draw what the music tells them to do. For older students, having them close to their eyes enhances the sensorial experience and the release, as they are less likely to feel self-conscious if they focus only on what they (and others) can hear, not what everyone can see.

### Helpful tips

For each session of this activity, try playing two very different pieces of music. For example, start with music that is fast and wild-sounding, and then do the exercise with music that is calmer and more soothing. It is also a good idea to play different music each time you try this activity, so that your students have a different experience each time.

### Musical suggestions include:

#### Fast:

Title: “The Final Countdown” (Live version)  
Artist: Melo-M  
Album: Live at Riga Congress Centre

#### Calm:

Title: “Abraham’s Theme”  
Artist: Vangelis  
Album: Chariots of Fire

## Release activity #3: Be the Conductor You Are the Music



### What age groups does this work for?

These two activities share the same basic elements, with developmentally appropriate modifications for children in different age groups. Be the Conductor is for kids ages four to eight, and You Are the Music is for kids ages nine and up.

### What do you need to make it happen?

For these activities, you need rousing music that is unlikely to be familiar to your students. Do not use Top 40 or other popular music, as your students will already have associations for how they “should” move to that kind of music, which undermines the benefits of the activity. Instead, choose instrumental, drumming, or even nature sounds like a wild hurricane.

### Here are some music suggestions:

Title: “The Heart Asks Pleasure First”

Performers: Munich Philharmonic, John Harle

Album: The Piano: Music from the Motion Picture

Title: “A Different Drum”

Artist: Peter Gabriel

Album: Passion: Music for The Last Temptation of Christ

### How do you do it?

- Have the students spread out across the room facing you so that they can follow your lead. Ensure that each student has plenty of room to move, with no other student within 6 feet of them. (Providing visual spot markers for where students should stand will help.)
- Once everyone is on their spot, pretend that you have “glue” in your hands and rub the “glue” on the bottom of each of your feet. Have the students follow you and also pretend to “glue” their own feet down. Everyone should now be standing in their own spot with their feet “glued” down.
- Now, explain that when the music starts, everyone is going to conduct an orchestra with just their arms and bodies—but they can’t lift their feet!
- I recommend that you also participate in the activity, facing your students. But let them know that they do not have to copy you—that they should just follow the music. For example, if the music is fast, then so are their movements! If the music is slow, then they should also slow down.
- To help your students transition in and out of the activity, tell them that they can “unglue” their feet when the music stops. It is important to structure activities to contain the experience for them, and that will make it easier for you to transition students in and out of activities. It is also helpful to explain “start” and “stop” cues before beginning.

### Modifications for ages nine to eleven

For students ages nine to eleven, this exercise works best when they have their eyes closed. This helps them feel less self-conscious and nervous, and it ensures that they can benefit from the sensorial experience and release. If they are not comfortable closing their eyes, you can instruct them to look down at the floor or try to mostly close their eyes and only peek through their eyelashes.

Before you begin, let the students know that it is as if *they* are the music. That it is as if the music is going to go into them and direct their movements. They will not have to think of what to do: they simply have to let the music lead them. For example, if the music goes fast, so do their arms, fingers, etc. If the music slows down, so does their body. Even if your students close their eyes, it is still important for you to face them and engage in the same activity. Your presence at the front of the room, modelling and participating in the same exercise, will help support those children who might hesitate to participate otherwise (especially those who will be tempted to peek!).

### What’s the benefit?

This activity encourages students to engage parts of their body that they may not typically use when they are active. Being “forbidden” to use their legs, they will automatically begin to use their arms, hands, fingers, face, head, knees, and torso to release physical energy. Additionally, this activity can help easily channel built-up frustrated energy, as a child does not have to think about what to do. Most children find it very easy to follow the music. In this way, there is less thinking and more releasing. Furthermore, when older children do this activity with their eyes closed, it helps them better tap into their internal feelings.

### Helpful tips

Dimming the lights can help create a warmer and more comfortable atmosphere for everyone, regardless of the age group.

# DRUMMING

- Have everyone sit in a circle and hold their drums.
- You are in the centre of the circle and are the “conductor” of the drumming experience
- You set the tempo and speed for the drumming. Slowly, quickly, .....very very quickly! Alternate speeds and modify the tempo up and down while your students follow you.
- Every once in a while, you can even freeze your hands so that the students know to stop drumming . . . and then start waving your hands suddenly and quickly!



## What is the benefit?

Drumming is a great way to help students release energy, as they get to bang something—which feels great for many people! This can be especially helpful as an activity before a task that requires their focused attention.

## Helpful tip

It helps to dim the lights for a calmer atmosphere. For children ages nine to eleven, you could have two or three conductors lead during each session for one minute each, every time you do the activity. And if you can see that a child clearly needs some extra support to release extra energy, consider choosing them to lead the drumming session as conductor.

Hannah Beach

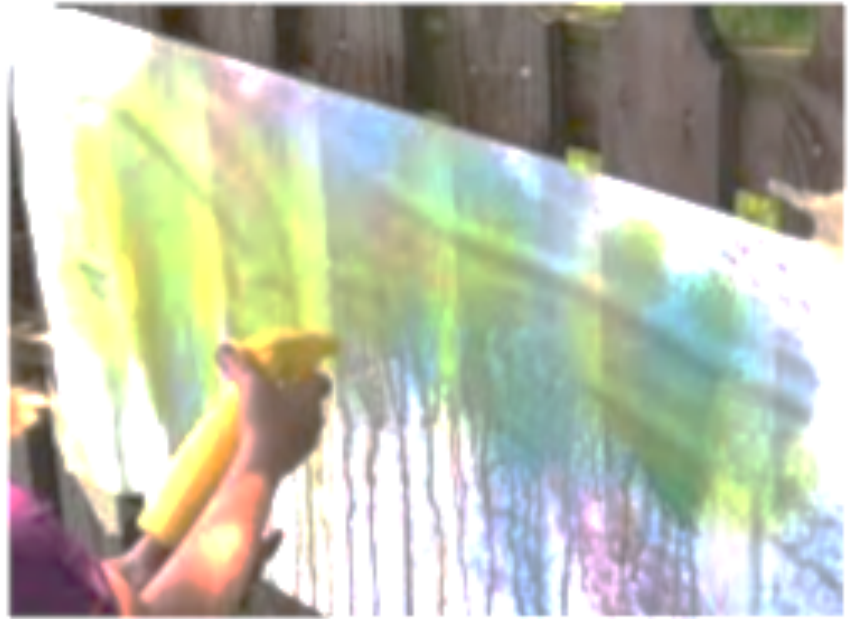
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# SQUEEZE AWAY

## What do you need to make it happen?

- Water
- a spray bottle for each student
- large roll of white paper
- washable finger paint (optional)
- masking tape (optional)



## How do you do it?

There are many variations on this activity:

- Freestyle watercolor painting
- Tape a long piece of paper on one side of an outdoor wall at the height of your students. The paper should be long enough for each student to have enough space and paper.
- Fill spray bottles with a mix of the finger paints and water.
- Then SPRAY! You and your students can create a wall of colour with pictures and designs.

## What's the benefit?

The spray-squeeze action actually takes a lot of physical energy, and it provides a great release. On top of it, kids find the sensation of spraying water to be super-fun!

## Helpful tips

Sometimes just working outside and listening to the wind and the rustle of the trees is just enough. However, if you feel the students need more of a container for the activity, you may wish to play music as a backdrop for this experience. It can provide further release, momentum, and energy towards the activity.



## Inside Out Activity: The Frustration Monster!

Written by Hannah Beach (April 7, 2020)

<https://hannahbeach.ca/the-frustration-monster/>



This is a great activity for kids ages five to eleven. (These ages are approximate and are suggested guidelines only.)

### What's the benefit?

This activity can help a child think about frustration and what it feels like inside of them. It can also help children express their frustration, as it gives them the permission to draw a really ugly picture. Often children are expected to make “nice” drawings, and this activity gives them the space and room to do otherwise.

This activity can support children to:

- release their pent-up frustration, which can otherwise lead to outbursts of aggression.
- connect to, reflect on, and express their feelings of frustration in a safe way. This helps them to build consciousness around their feelings, which is essential for them to develop impulse control, emotional maturity, and resilience, as well as embark on a path of self-discovery.

### What do you need to make it happen?

- A piece of paper per child
- Crayons/markers for each child (if none available, a pen or pencil will do)
- Background music (optional) Music suggestions below

### How do you do it?

- Ask your students to remember a time when they felt really frustrated.
- Then ask them to imagine that their frustration was a MONSTER!
- Ask them to draw the monster. Give them some verbal prompts, like:
  - “Can you draw what your frustration monster looks like? Make it as wild and ugly as you wish!”*
  - “She is a mad monster! Show me how frustrated she is!”*
  - “What colour(s) is your monster?”*
  - “How ugly can you make him?!”*
- If a child cannot remember a time when they felt frustrated, then let them know that they can just make it up: “That’s okay—just invent a frustration monster and make him as frustrated and ugly as you can!”



## Facilitating this online?

- Ask your students to have paper/crayons ready for that class. For younger students, this would mean emailing the family ahead of class time so that they can have the materials ready.
- Once online with your students, check that they have paper/crayons beside them and won't need to leave to find them after you start. If they don't have them ready, give your students a few minutes to gather materials. (And if there are no crayons to be found in the house, they can simply use a pen or pencil!)
- Talk to your students every once in a while during their drawing time to reassure them that you are still there with them and to hold the space for them, especially if you sense restlessness. 10 minutes is a long time to not hear your teachers voice, especially if you are not physically together or if your students are younger. ("Now I am changing the music so we can listen to a different piece" or "Oooh...my monster is getting very ugly, I'm looking forward to seeing yours!") You can also adjust how long the activity is to meet your student's needs.

## Let your students know that:

- everyone is going to have 10 minutes to draw their frustration monsters.
- you are going to play some music for them while they draw. (This really helps to keep kids engaged in the activity. It can also help them to tap into their feelings.)
- NOT to show anyone else in the class their drawings until you ask them to.
- that if they finish their drawing before you ask everyone to return, that they can just doodle or draw whatever they want to.
- that they can begin when the music starts. And that you will be drawing your monster too!

**Note:** You could also do this activity by explaining the activity to the children and then ask them to do it in their own time and return to the online class at a specific time/day to share their drawings. If you do it this way, make sure to remind them that when they return to the computer, to NOT show anyone else their drawing until you invite them to.

## Helpful tips:

- If your students don't know what "frustration" means, tell them to think of a time that they really wanted something but couldn't get it, and it made them feel really mad. This explanation will resonate with most kids.
- It is best to not tell children that this kind of activity is "good" for them as it may make them feel self-conscious or even resistant to participating in the activity. Instead, just introduce it casually, as in:  
*"I thought that before we did our math lesson today that we could all draw together for a bit. Today we are going to be drawing frustration monsters! Here is how it is going to work..."* (And then go on to explain the next steps.)
- This activity works best if the music you select feels energetic: think big music, strong emotions.

**Music suggestions:** (To fill 10 minutes of time you would need both of these pieces.)

Title: "The Final Countdown" (Live version)  
Artist: Melo-M  
Album: Live at Riga Congress Centre

Title: "Moving Worlds"  
Artist: Secession Studios  
Album: Epoch



## Ideas for how to share them with one another:

BEFORE the kids show them to one another, let them know that it's OK if their frustration monster looks completely different than everyone else's!

There are no rules about what it should look like:

- It's OK if they did just the head, or they drew the whole body.
- It's OK if they only had a pencil or not many colours as it is hard to go shopping right now, so not to worry if theirs isn't as colourful as other peoples.

Ask them to all turn their sound off so that they can hear you, but they can't hear one another. (I don't know about you, but I have been teaching online now for a few weeks and have found it much easier to teach when my students sound is off and then they each turn their sound on one at a time. Otherwise we can't hear one another for all the background noise.)

Depending on what you feel is best for the students you work with, you could:

- invite all the children (and you) to hold up their pictures at the same time to show one another. This can feel less vulnerable than everyone's eyes being on one picture at a time. You could then make global comments about the group's pictures: "Wow! Yikes! These are crazy monsters!"
- let them know that they can hang this up in their own home if they want to, or crumple it up in a ball and recycle it!

\* This activity is from the **Inside-Out handbook**; the experiential companion guide to *Reclaiming Our Students: Why Children Are More Anxious, Aggressive, and Shut Down Than Ever—And What We Can Do About It*, co-authored by Hannah Beach & Tamara Neufeld Strijack.

Warmly,  
Hannah Beach

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## **Kids are playing “coronavirus tag.” Should we be worried?**

Written by Hannah Beach (April 2, 2020)

<https://hannahbeach.ca/rest-rhythm-release-helping-kids-cope-with-covid-19/>

Like many of us, my family recently learned that my son’s school would be shut down due to the coronavirus epidemic. On his last day of school before the shut down, we were chatting, when he casually told me he had been playing “coronavirus tag” with his friends at lunch!

Initially, I was mortified. My first thought was “Yikes! That is really insensitive!” As his mother, being aware of all the pain so many people are experiencing right now, I was CRINGING at the idea of my son participating in such a ghoulish game.

However, my second thought was, **“YES! Thank goodness. This is exactly what is supposed to happen.”** Let me explain.

### **It is normal – and healthy – for kids to play out their fears**

I’ve been hearing from many parents that they are stumbling on their younger ones, finding them “isolating” their dolls to keep them safe. Other kids are pretending to be doctors and taking care of their stuffed animals in a pretend hospital. Even one of my staff members sent me pictures the other day of a series of scary dragon drawings that one of her younger students sent to her.

And I’ve learned that my son and his friends are not the only kids right now playing coronavirus tag. Friends and family members have shared the same thing with me, even though they live in other cities. In fact, there are reports of kids playing this game in many communities in North America and England!

It can be very worrisome and uncomfortable to see these shifts in the way that our kids play and express themselves. But here’s the thing: it is only natural for children to play out their fears and their anxiety through play and art. And it is no coincidence that this kind of play is emerging spontaneously amongst kids in households and communities and countries around the world. This is what is supposed to happen.

Play is how children digest their lives. It is how they make sense of their world, release intense emotions like frustration and anxiety, and understand what they are experiencing without feeling threatened or overwhelmed.

Through play, kids get to experience something one step removed from real life, in a way that helps them to feel that no matter what, they will be ok. In fact, children are drawn to make sense of scary things through play. We see this in their interest in fairy tales that often deal with frightening topics in simple ways. We see this in how they devour books in which being orphaned is a central theme (think Harry Potter, Anne of Green Gables, The Secret Garden, Bambi ... the list goes on and on!)

Why is this the case? Why do kids often want to read books in which children are abandoned or scary things happen?

When books and fairy tales are age-appropriate (an important caveat!), they gently touch on dark and frightening topics in a way that allows children to process them, one step removed from real life. By engaging in imaginary scenarios, scary themes and ideas do not feel as



threatening as real life. Kids get a chance to see the imaginary child survive in the face of difficulty. Good triumphs over evil. They process that even when terrible things happen, it is going to be OK.

This is the same for other kinds of games and play with darker themes, which help children release anxiety in a safe environment.

That child playing hospital with a stuffed animal, tucking it into bed? They may be feeling a sense of agency. They become the nurturer; part of the solution to bringing comfort and ease to those in their care. In this case it may be dolls and teddy bears, not people, but their feelings of caring for others in this way can soothe them.

The child drawing pictures of scary monsters? They may be experiencing a sense of release by putting their fears out on paper.

The kids that are engaging in pretend sword fights with each other, attempting to slay the horrible Dr. Corona? Well, the slayer may be experiencing a sense of power by being the hero. And the child playing the “bad guy” may be enjoying digging deeply into this character, because it gives them a sense of control over things that worry or frighten them.

Fundamentally, it is through play that kids get to imagine how they will survive in the face of adversity, and practice being ok, no matter what happens. And this is why – as macabre as it sounds – we shouldn’t panic when we see our kids playing out their fears.

## So what should – and shouldn’t – we do?

It’s amazing, actually, that nature gave children this incredible tool – play – to take care of their emotions. Play is not an “extra”; it is essential in our children’s lives. It is a release valve, a rehearsal ground for life, and a medium that allows children to safely make sense of and process their internal and external worlds.

But even if we know, theoretically, that this kind of play is healthy for our children, it can be difficult to know how we should respond when we become aware of our children exploring intense and scary ideas. Here are some guidelines:

- **DO provide kids with unstructured time that supports free play.**

Remember, you do not have to turn into an entertainment director. All you have to do is provide some time for free play – that is, time that is free of structured activities, TV, the Internet, and electronics – so your children’s imaginations can run free while they engage in any activity that is appealing to them.

And if you’re worried about your kids getting bored – don’t! In fact, if your kids get a bit bored while they’re at home, this is a good thing. It is when kids get bored that they start looking for things to do, and they start to put their own imaginations to work. This is when they discover and engage in play that supports their internal world and that helps to regulate their emotional systems.

- **DON’T comment on what kids are doing or saying.**

In order to fall into a world of play, it is important for kids not to feel self-conscious or like they are being watched. And in the same vein, it’s best to not tell children that this kind of play is “good” for them. Again, it’s likely to make them feel self conscious, or they might even resist it. The last thing we want to do is to inadvertently remove this healthy emotional outlet from them.



So, it is a good thing to notice and to monitor their play – but don’t turn it into a topic of conversation around the dinner table!

- **DON’T try to influence the process.**

You might also be wondering if you should intervene, by offering to help your kids take care of their sick stuffed animals, for example. Inserting ourselves into our children’s imaginary worlds is not necessary and can even sometimes direct it away from where the child may naturally lead their play themselves. We need to let them play out whatever it is that they might be feeling or thinking, without influencing their own narrative or storyline.

## Should we ever be worried?

Free play is especially important for kids during times like these. As parents and caregivers, our main focus should be to provide enough unstructured time for children to engage in free play, and to simply make note of what they are doing. It is very, very likely that we will see kids eventually move on from things like “coronavirus tag” as they adjust to what is happening in the world right now.

However, if we notice that a child seems very “stuck” on a dark theme to the point of obsession, it is a good idea to consult with a doctor or mental health professional. It is totally normal for kids to be making scary drawings and playing hospital right now, especially with so much changing on a daily basis – but if they seem obsessed with these themes for weeks or months on end, we should follow our guts and check in with a professional.

And if kids are engaging in forms of play that are hurtful to themselves or others (physically or emotionally), then, of course, we have to step in. For example, if a child is forcing another child into playing a game that is not fun for all involved, that requires our intervention. If an older sibling insists on playing the Coronavirus Monster and scaring a younger sibling in a manner that doesn’t elicit delighted shrieks and clear signs of mutual fun, but rather fearful tears, we have to step in.

## Let’s be thankful for play

Children are not simply miniature adults. They process big emotions in the way that nature intended: through the safety of play, surrounded by the warmth and security of us.

There are always caveats; but especially at a time like now, we should expect changes in the ways our children play, and simply take note of them. It can even help if we practice being thankful when we see these kinds of play, because it gives us a clue as to what they are feeling inside. And, the knowledge that play provides a healthy outlet for our children to release their emotions and digest the world around them can help all to breathe a collective sigh of relief!

Warmly,  
Hannah Beach

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# Kids Need a Safe Space to Feel

Written by Hannah Beach (January 15, 2020)

<https://hannahbeach.ca/kids-need-a-safe-space-to-feel/>

## Our kids are experiencing an emotional crisis.

Children are more anxious, aggressive, and shut down than ever. We are seeing clear evidence of this in our schools, our homes, our neighbourhoods and our community spaces. The situation has become so dire that our newspapers are literally writing stories about *elementary school-aged children punching, kicking and biting their teachers*<sup>1</sup>. In fact, 54% of Ontario teachers surveyed in 2017/18 reported these experiences – and I know from my work across Canada that these problems are endemic in every part of our country.

Child experts and psychologists are being interviewed on radio talk shows and podcasts as we try to understand the roots of this crisis and what we should do. And, as teachers and helping professionals try to respond – or frankly, just try to get through the day – there are more and more ideas as to why this is happening and how we can create change. I know that my own inbox is filled with newsletters and blog posts that propose character education and prescriptive solutions. They promise things like “Seven steps to help children learn emotional health,” or “How to teach children to communicate peacefully during conflicts.”

If only it were so easy as teaching kids to follow a series of steps, or to apply a framework to manage their emotions like adults. If only *adults* were able to manage their emotions in these ways!

## Emotional Health Cannot be “Taught”

Why can't we “teach” kids how to be emotionally healthy? The answer to this question lies in understanding what emotions *are* and what it means to be emotionally healthy.

Emotions – happiness, sadness, fear, love, anger, etc. – are physiological, instinctive and involuntary processes that happen inside us. We all have them. Our emotions play a pivotal role in how we respond, behave, and interact with our world – *whether we are aware of them or not*.

Our *feelings* make us aware of the emotions we are experiencing. Our feelings are the conscious messages that we receive from our emotions that let us know what we are experiencing. In order to be emotionally healthy, we must:

- be *aware* of our emotions – which means that we must be able to *feel* them
- be able to *express* our emotions
- be able to recognize and respect the feelings that others express to us

I know that seems like a daunting list – but the most important part is that emotional health starts with *feeling*. This is not an intellectual process that can be taught out of a textbook. Building emotional health calls for *experiences* that put us in touch with the full spectrum of human emotions – even the ones that we often try so hard to avoid.

I love how Dr. Gordon Neufeld distills this concept to its fundamental core:

*“The essence of the issue regarding emotional health and well-being is that children need to feel their emotions, even their most vulnerable ones. There is no humanity without feeling, no maturation without feeling, no resilience without feeling, no adaptation without feeling, no empathy without feeling.”<sup>2</sup>*

– Dr. Gordon Neufeld

Everything about Dr. Neufeld's framing of emotional health rings true for me and what I have witnessed in my experiential work with children for the past 25 years. The root cause of the



emotional crisis and resulting behavioural issues we see in our homes, schools and communities every day is that **children are losing their feelings**.

Think about it: how often do we resort to tactics like systems of rewards and punishment to get kids to “be good”, only to be faced with comments like “Whatever,” or “I don’t care,” or “It doesn’t matter”? Or how often do we hear “I don’t know” when we ask a child why they deliberately disobey us or hurt someone? We are getting these kinds of responses because so many children literally are not feeling their emotions. But that doesn’t mean that they are not still driven by their emotions. Even if we are not conscious of our emotions through feelings that clue us into what is happening inside us, we are still driven to act upon them. This is very confusing when it happens to us as adults – and it is even more so for children.

Change doesn’t begin with managing our emotions as an intellectual process that we systematically think through in the heat of the moment! Change – true, deep, long-lasting change – is something that comes from the *inside out*. It begins with *feeling* our emotions, being truly aware of them, having the space to express them, and then acting on them in ways that are appropriate. It is at the emotional level that the deepest, most long-lasting changes occur. And it is on this level that we have to engage our kids, if we want to support their emotional well-being. So how do we help our kids find their feelings?

## It starts with relationship

***We need to help our kids find their feelings in the most human way possible.***

Through 25 years of experience in developing experiential programs for children, I have learned that this starts with **building positive relationships with the children we work with every day**. Whether you are a teacher, social worker, or a helping professional, research now clearly shows that a safe emotional connection with a caring adult is the best way to protect our children’s hearts. One strong, trusting relationship with a caring adult has the power to positively impact a child’s emotional health and well-being forever. When children feel deeply cared for, this supports them to develop their own caring feelings which makes them naturally more sensitive to the emotional needs of others.

This might sound incredibly simple, or even obvious. It might also sound “soft,” or “too easy” to be true. It is anything but that. The fact is, the way that we deal with troubling child and youth behaviours today – through systems of rewards and punishment, or by trying to be “friends” with children and have them see us as their peers – are not helping the problem. At best, these approaches are ineffective. And at worst, they exacerbate the problem, because they alienate us from the very children that we are trying to support.

Instead, we have to find our way back into relationships with the children in our care that make them feel safe with us, so that they can then be open to our guidance. **We need to be their safe place**, the place where they feel safe enough to take down the box around their hearts. And once we do that, we have an opportunity to make meaningful change in their lives.

## And, our feelings need to play

Just as important as building strong relationships with children is providing them with opportunities in which their feelings can come out to play. In other words, **we need to provide them with emotional playgrounds. And in my experience, the most powerful emotional playgrounds of all are the arts – but not in the way that most of us think of them.**

From the very beginning of time—as we drew on cave walls, danced around fires, shared stories, sang songs, and sculpted clay—adults and children alike have been expressing themselves through the arts. Cultures are created over time, holding the wisdom of what is

needed to sustain the emotional health of individuals and communities. The fact that every traditional culture has developed rituals of singing, sharing stories, and dancing together is not a coincidence. These art forms have served as expressive outlets that bring people together to release what needs to be released and to share in the collective reflection of what it means to be human. Simply put, they bring us to our feelings, and to the feelings of one another. And these experiences are essential to healthy emotional development.

The profound impact of the arts on the emotional health and well-being of our children and broader communities is now coming back to our attention through a global paradigm shift. Where once the arts were seen as “extras” in curricula and community programs, researchers and experts in emotional health are beginning to understand the extraordinary power of the arts to awaken feeling, support emotional growth, and in doing so, connect us to one another. This might feel like a surprising revelation today – but if we consider historical cultural practices over thousands of years, we begin to see that artistic rituals and practices that have been woven into our lives are integral to healthy human development.

Human beings have a deep need to express what is inside of us so that we may become known and make visible to others our inner worlds. This expression helps us make sense of who we are and to bring us into the world of another. Artistic experiences are where we can truly *feel our emotions* in unparalleled ways. We listen to music that moves us, or watch great films that bring us catharsis. We share stories that take us on journeys of emotion —sadness, joy, loss, pain, and hope—offering glimpses into the experiences of others and of what it means to be fully human.

When artistic experiences are about process, rather than outcome, they can become playgrounds for our feelings. When we offer children opportunities for artistic expression in ways that are truly *playful* and that are held by the safety of our relationship – i.e. in ways that don’t make them feel pressure to create something “good” or “perfect,” but simply to *be* who they are and share that with us and others – we support their healthy emotional development. And when they feel connected to us through a strong relationship – when we become their compass point – that is when these experiences will result in the most profound changes. The emotional health that emerges from these experiences is the *fruit* of relationship and play – and as such, it is profound and long-lasting.

## Where do we go from here?

No matter how much we wish for prescriptive steps and strategies to support the emotional health of our children, it simply is not the way people work. We are filled with emotion. We are messy and complicated – and we need to stop trying to affect change through our heads.

What do we need as humans? We need to be connected and we need to be safe to feel.

Is this messy? Yes, absolutely, wonderfully so.

And in the complicated messy place in which our feelings are alive, this is where we become beautifully and imperfectly human. This is where we can feel the range of our emotions. This is where we may feel our sadness and discover our resilience. This is where we may feel our joy and be vulnerable enough to be hopeful. This is where we can sense one another’s humanity. And this is emotional health.

I’m looking forward to digging more deeply into these concepts and sharing my thoughts, ideas and stories from working with children and youth from all walks of life, as well as professionals in the fields of education, social work, and community building. Systemic change that supports

the emotional health of children *is* possible – and it begins at a very human level, in everyday one-on-one interactions between adults and the children in their care.

There is another way. I’d love you to join me.

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## **When Push Comes to Shove: The Answer to Children's Aggression**

**by Dr. Deborah MacNamara**

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Aggressive behaviour in children can be alarming. Hitting, screaming and yelling, fighting with others, and even eye rolling are emotionally charged actions that can leave parents at a loss for how to respond.

Getting to the root of aggression is key to helping your child navigate their feelings and develop self-control. If we focus only on our child's aggressive behaviour and lack insight into what drives it then we may view our child as mean-spirited, entitled, spoiled, inconsiderate, or in need of retaliatory "tough love". We may be provoked to respond with threats, punishments, and even physical force, which exacerbates the problem and does little to help our child mature emotionally. In short, it is hard to change a child's behaviour when you don't grasp what fuels it. By understanding aggression and the role it plays in human nature, adults are in a better position to help change the behaviour at a root level. The good news is there a lot we can do to support a child in developing self-control over their big emotions.

### **IT'S NOTHING PERSONAL**

As a parent, you've likely experienced how a child's emotions can change seemingly without warning—from happy and content to screaming and stomping at some perceived wrong. This lack of tempering and self-control in children isn't personal but developmental. A very young child may promise they won't hit again only to turn around and strike someone minutes later. When asked why they didn't stop hitting they might say, "I forgot." And as frustrating as that statement can be, in that moment, they are likely being truthful, as a child can only keep one thought or feeling in their head at a time. By the age of seven, kids who are maturing well have developed the cognitive capacity to better manage their emotions.

Too often we take our children's emotions personally instead of seeing them as a means of communication. When we shift our perspective on aggression, we are more likely to gain insight into the emotions that are driving the child and focus on helping them develop emotional maturity. Our children's emotions are the way their brain moves them to solve problems, and they are hard-wired to demand expression.

### **FRUSTRATION CUES, AGGRESSION ANSWERS**

Many people assume that aggression is the result of anger. However, there is a more fundamental emotion that fuels aggression: frustration. Frustration is the emotion that moves us to seek change—whether to make something happen or to make something stop happening. When it collides head-on with the realization that there are certain things we just can't have or are unable to change, frustration is compounded, sometimes giving way to aggressive behaviours. The job of parents is to help little ones navigate their frustration by finding words for it or alternate forms of expression that don't hurt others.

Rather than just focusing on getting a child to stop the behaviour, the trick to dealing with aggression is to focus on the feeling behind the action. Frustration in the child is where we need to pay attention and recognize what we may have missed, like a child who is tired or hungry. A child's frustrated actions are a call to us to take the lead and change what isn't working, rather than just engaging in a head-to-head battle. Sometimes it's as simple as providing a snack or instigating



naptime, but there are also times when we can't change what isn't working and need strategies to help them accept the limits and boundaries that come with life.

### ***Lead through the storm***

Understandably, children aren't always eager to accept our limits and restrictions; in fact, they are well known for pushing back against them. Part of the challenge in dealing with children's frustration is not letting our own frustration at their actions make matters worse. When we punish or administer consequences, we effectively fuel their frustration which often leads to an escalation of attacking behaviour. I once overheard a mother punish her child because he didn't follow her by taking away his screen time. Not only did he still not follow, but he hit her and the escalation of aggression between them grew. Instead of meeting the child where he was and working through his perceived defiance, the mother's emotions led them into a dangerous spiral. As tough as it is, we need to try and stay out of the aggression whirlpool and plant ourselves firmly in the ground of the relationship.

### ***In the key of empathy***

In difficult moments, it can feel daunting to be patient in the face of a child's frustration, let alone aggression. It can be helpful to focus on frustration and to come alongside their emotions, from the unpleasantness of the decision you have made—whether it's having to follow along in a boring grocery store, or not getting another cookie, not being able to stay up late, or not attending a much-desired event. Granting a child the time and space to grasp and realize that life is full of disappointments and helping them acknowledge that it feels bad is time well spent. If the child is moved to tears, then the frustration is shifted to sadness, and away from hurting others.

### ***Preserve your relationship***

What happens when the opportunity to calmly commiserate or wipe away tears of disappointment has passed? When a child isn't ready to give up what they want, their frustration can be outright foul. Hostile behaviour, throwing, biting, screaming, head-banging, fits of rage, and verbal insults can result as that venting ramps up into aggression.

One of the most important things we can do when a child is lashing out in frustration is aim to preserve our relationship with them, especially since a lack of connection in such times can make aggression worse. This means leading through the impasse by being patient, yet firm, and possibly changing the circumstances around the child, such as removing items that can be thrown, and taking other children out of harm's way. It is especially helpful to stop what we are doing and give a child our full attention without giving in to our own frustration.

Gently reminding a child that frustration needs to be expressed through words that aren't hurtful is an important strategy. Similarly, preserve their dignity by avoiding statements like, "You are so mean!" or "Why do you hurt people?" These succeed only in shaming the child and suggests there is something wrong with them for having the emotion of frustration. By coming alongside the child and acknowledging that they are having a hard time, you help reduce the aggression and keep the relationship healthy.

Handling an aggressive situation when your own reserves are drained can be hard to do, not just for you, but also for your child. In a worst-case-scenario where patience is stretched to its thinnest, aim for doing no harm to the relationship before you attempt to quell the storm. To keep everyone's dignity intact, it's okay to wait

until emotions have discharged before talking to your child about what was driving them and what your expectations are.

We all know (or have been parented by) parents who dismiss, suppress, or debase their children's feelings. While in the short run it might produce a docile child, muzzling the emotions can lead to problems with emotional and behavioural combustion down the road. Rather than using logic to convince feelings to go away or denying the realness and legitimacy of emotions, children need the opportunity to express, recognize, and mature into their feelings. The real answer to aggression is supporting a child's healthy emotional development and to grow within them the ability to control, reflect on, and find civil ways to deal with their big emotions.

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## What to do with Frustration by Lisa Weiner (July 2nd, 2020)

If one were trying to create a recipe for frustration, these past few months would be the winning combination. Frustration is one of our primary mammalian emotions and **it arises when things are not going the way we want them to.**

Not being able to move about the world as we are used to doing? Frustrating! Having to do schoolwork all day at home? Frustrating! Not being able to see grandparents, teachers or cousins? Frustrating! Having to supervise schoolwork all day at home while trying simultaneously to work and/or do all the other things that need to get done? Also frustrating!

**One of the foundational truths about emotion is that it seeks expression.** If we understand this truth, we can make the time and space for expression. If we don't, our emotions will seek expression anyway and will leak (or explode) out of us without our consent. With the emotion of frustration, we all know what this eruption can look like: sharp words, tantrums (kid and adult versions), sarcasm, hitting (or impulses to hit), door slamming, self-harm and so on.

These days, *as frustrating circumstances abound*, we would be wise as parents to make sure that we build in regular times for emotion (both ours and our children's) to come out in ways that we are generally okay with; that we make time and space for what Dr. Gordon Neufeld calls "emotional playgrounds." Emotional playgrounds are activities or practices that provide unrushed time and ample space for emotions to move. They are, in essence, emotional "outhouses": designated places where discharges of emotion, which are sometimes unsavory and unappealing, can happen. The outhouse comparison is especially apt because we all know what type of mess awaits us when we don't make regular trips to the outhouse . . .

When we are thinking about the **expression of frustration** there are three broad categories of activities where it can "come out to play": **destructive** activities, **constructive** activities and **melancholy-inducing** activities.

It is probably obvious to all of us how destructive play "vents" frustration. Frustration can build up in our children (or ourselves) like a volcano that is ready to erupt; these types of activities provide places for the explosive energy to safely go.

Some examples of **destructive** activities are:

- Making a "This Sucks" box (like an old-fashioned complaint box) in the kitchen where family members can deposit paper slips filled with frustration whenever it needs to come out (if "sucks" isn't part of your approved vocabulary, remember that oftentimes the edgier the play is, the more aligned it is with getting foul frustration out safely)
- Slamming a punching bag
- Hammering glass bottles wrapped up in a towel
- Chopping wood
- Drawing a picture of someone or something and ripping it up
- Creating a "shit book" (a journal for rants and swear words and other generally unacceptable things)



Constructive play can also be a great way to move frustration. This makes sense if we remember that frustration comes when things aren't going the way we want. Frustration comes from wanting change, so being able to make something go just the way we want is a great release for the frustration that builds up around all the things that we can't change.

Some examples of constructive activities are:

- Making something just right, be it through woodworking, ceramics, baking or cooking
- Planting and tending to a vegetable garden
- Organizing a drawer, desk or bookshelf

Finally, and perhaps a bit confoundingly, activities that call forth a bit of sadness also help frustration to move. One of the greatest ways that frustration is released is through its conversion to sadness. In simplistic terms: can we get mad to turn to sad? This is the ultimate answer to all the things we can't change: to become changed ourselves by those very things, to adapt to things that are not going the way we wish they were. This is the root of true resilience, and this is why melancholy-inducing activities are so good at draining built-up frustration.

Some examples of melancholy-inducing activities are:

- Watching sad movies
- Reading poetry
- Making music or listening to music
- Reflective journaling

As you can imagine, each of these lists could go on and on—there are as many emotional playgrounds as there are people, and what works for someone may fall flat for someone else. It is important to find what works for each of your children, to find what works for you. As Dr. Neufeld says, all children have their “bent.” Are they a hitter? A yeller? A builder? A painter? We just need to figure out what that bent is.

During this time when so much is not going as we would like it to—this time of many daily frustrations—it should be integral to our newly reinvented schedules to have time for each member of the family to play. We all need places—at least a few times each week—where our frustration can move. We are often so afraid that if we give frustration an inch it will take a mile.

In truth, just the opposite is true. If we give our frustration some open space to flow, it will be much less likely to burst out of us when we are least expecting it.

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## **The Emotional Roots of Anxiety: Healing Through Connection**

**by Dr. Deborah MacNamara**

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From waves of panic to uneasy feelings that rise up from the gut, anxiety is a universal human experience. It comes as no surprise then, that anxiety continues to be one of the most commonly diagnosed mental health issues in children and adults today, with the World Health Organization naming it as one of the leading concerns among children ages 4 to 17 worldwide.

What is anxiety? It is usually accompanied by symptoms such as agitation, incessant worrying, trouble focusing, panic, feeling full of fear, nightmares, and clinging behaviour. My 5-year old daughter once asked, “Mommy, why does it feel like my tummy is making butter?” That churning feeling that comes with anxiety, along with many other physical and emotional symptoms, alerts us to the fact that we are stirred up. Despite reassurance from others that there is nothing to worry about, anxiety can sink its teeth in deep and hold on.

When the mind and body are in turmoil, anxiety will follow wherever you go – from your bed to the dinner table, and to school. The problem is that its symptoms tell us very little about what is at the root of the feelings. Parents often turn to their kids for answers asking, “What is the matter?” When they are met with blank stares, puzzling explanations, or protestations of, “I don’t know!” it can elevate a parent’s anxiety as well.

The problem with anxiety is we cannot make headway unless we can make sense of it at its root level, as asserted by Gordon Neufeld, an internationally respected developmental and attachment-based psychologist. There is an epicentre to anxiety, but we often dance around its symptoms instead of reaching into its core, where the real problem lies.

### **Perceiving past the symptoms**

The key to understanding anxiety is to name the emotion that drives it: alarm. When a threat is detected by the brain’s surveillance system, it responds by releasing a cascade of chemicals that literally changes our physiology and enables us to quickly respond. When separation has opened up, the brain will respond with increased alarm, frustration, and pursuit in order to close the distance.

To do this, we need to first identify the most fundamental need of all humans. The one non-negotiable thing that all children and adults require for healthy emotional growth and well-being is attachment. As an interdependent species, we were designed to hunger for contact and closeness from each other, and it is through attachment that we are able to raise children, to care for each other, and create a civil society.

The purpose of attachment is to ensure that children depend on their adults to guide and protect them and that we, in turn, provide these things. When children lean into you for caretaking, they are willing to follow, listen, attend, orient to, and obey. The deeper a child’s attachment roots, the greater their capacity to reach their potential as a social, separate, and adaptive being.

If relational attachment is the greatest of all human needs, then what is the most impactful and alarming of all experiences? The answer is separation—to find yourself apart from your attachments, which pushes the brain’s alarm system into full tilt as it tries to close the void that has opened up. You can witness a young

child’s desperate pursuit to get back into attachment when you tell them it’s time for bed and they begin clamouring for one more drink of water, a snack, a trip to the bathroom, another story, or plead, as one clever boy told his father, “Please come back—the spiders keep throwing me out of bed.” Separation is provocative because attachment is key to our survival.

## What sets off alarm bells?

There are many sources of separation that children can experience, from the obvious ones like moving houses, starting school, parents divorcing, or the loss of a loved one. But there are other surprising sources such as healthy growth, which pushes the preschooler to explore and use their imagination, the middle-schooler to try new things, and the teenager to figure out who they are and what they want to do with their life. At every age there are different developmental issues to face, each bringing an element of existential alarm with it. As Gordon Neufeld states, we don't teach 3-year-olds about monsters which they then become afraid of, it is their fear that creates the monsters in the first place.

Other sources of separation for kids include discipline that uses what a child cares about against them, euphemized as "consequences", "tough love", or "time-outs". These techniques use separation to alarm a child so that they will behave better but they backfire as they render an adult an adversary and, with this, reduce a child's desire to please or work towards meeting their adult's expectations. Relationship is the vehicle for getting a child to drive in a different direction, but separation discipline throws this off course and leaves relational insecurity in its wake.

Separation alarm is also created when our children fuse with friends to the exclusion of their adults. Referred to as "peer orientation", this gives rise to children with alarm problems because their peers are largely immature and impulsive, sometimes hurtful, substitutes. One day your child belongs in the group, the next day they don't, and the fickle friendships and wounding ways of kids especially hurt those who are more dependent on their same-age friends than their adults. Friends are important, but children weren't meant to be the answer to each other's fundamental attachment needs.

Separation alarm can also be attributed to physical separation like the loss of a parent to a new job, travel, injury, sickness, or the introduction of a new partner. Even success can create alarming feelings as the child lives in fear that they could lose the advances they have gained. Sensitive children who feel they are too much for their parents to handle are often full of anxiety because exasperated adults convey they don't know how to take care of them, leading to insecurity.

Separation alarm has the power to drive temporary anxiety symptoms to more chronic levels that can pervade all areas of life. The fall-out from chronic anxiety may lead to additional behavioural problems such as anger, agitation, feeling overwhelmed, disconnection, and depression, which can be misinterpreted, or overreacted to, by adults. While the symptoms of anxiety and sources of separation for kids become better understood, concurrent research suggests that if separation is the problem, then surely connection will be the cure.

## Bridging the void

What if we stopped for a moment and considered whether anxiety was, in fact, exactly what the brain wanted and intended? What if we looked at the emotion of alarm as having a very important job to do by noisily alerting parents that something isn't right in a child's world? And what if the brain is actually working well when it is

alarmed and the problem is not the alarm, per se, but rather how long and how hard the brain has to work to gain our attention by way of anxiety symptoms, which serve to draw people close to increase connection and close painful separation voids?

There are many things adults can do to increase connection and reduce alarm, but the guiding objective should be to bring a child to emotional rest. This can be facilitated by coming alongside and conveying a desire to be with them, to show care and read their needs, and take the lead in fulfilling them wherever possible. For example, if they are anxious at night-time, being generous with contact and closeness will help them rest better. When a child closes their eyes at night, they are separated from you. Bridging this divide can involve telling them about the plans for the following day, staying with them until they fall asleep, or tying invisible strings



around your beds to hold you together; if only in your child's imagination. Making room for their alarm and letting them know it's your job to worry about their sleep—not theirs—can go a long way in helping your child see you as in-charge, and able and willing to care for them.

If a child is anxious, it is also important to shield them from further causes of frustration wherever possible—from relationships that don't work well to avoiding introduction of new sources of separation. When a child is alarmed, it is a time to prune out unnecessary separations and focus on tethering them to the adults in their life. This can be achieved by orienting them to the invisible matrix of adults that will care for them. For example, telling a child, "When I take you to school, your teacher will take over for me. They are in charge, I trust them to care for you, and they know how to reach me if you need me. I will look forward to picking you up, too," helps to assure them that they are safe and loved, can feel connected to the adult who will take your place in your absence, and that you are never far away for long.

If separation discipline is being used in the home, it is also necessary to move away from time-outs and punitive consequences to more attachment and developmentally-friendly discipline, such as collecting a child before directing. This involves getting into their space in a friendly way, interacting with them in a positive manner, engaging in conversation, or paying attention to what they are focusing on, until you can feel the child warm up, start to listen, and want to follow. Using structure and routine to help them navigate their day also helps them feel safe. Kids who are anxious love ritual because it's predictable, thus, providing security.

## Letting out

Tears are the antithesis to alarm because they serve to drain the system and allow rest by neutralizing the chemicals associated with it. One of the most important ways we can bring our children to emotional rest is to facilitate tears when they are up against things that frustrate them. From the small things to the big upsets in their life, if an adult is willing to come alongside a child and make room for some tears, this can temporarily reduce restlessness, fear, and agitation.

To help a child to their tears, we need to meet them with empathy and warmth. Focus sincerely on what is upsetting them, despite how small or insignificant it may seem to us. Sometimes a parent may become upset by what they hear from a child, but it is best not to show these emotions and to find another adult to debrief with. Every child needs to feel confident that they are not too much for their adult to handle, that their feelings aren't too big or scary to express, and that there is no situation that they won't receive support with.

When a child is anxious, what we cannot lose sight of is how separation instigates the alarm behind it and that relationship is the vehicle through which healing occurs. When a child can safely feel their fear in a vulnerable way, they will be on the road to making sense of the emotions associated with alarm. When they can see and name what it is that stirs them up, and can freely express their emotions, they will be brought to emotional rest and find the courage to face the hard things. This process of holding onto and guiding them through alarming feelings and times will help them reaffirm the faith they have in their caregivers to love and take care of them exactly as they are.

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