

Patty's Preface

By the time I was thirteen, I knew kids inside and out. I was the oldest of six and already had years of experience taking care of younger siblings, cousins, and neighbors. At school, when rain kept kids inside for lunch, I was the one that the nuns sent to the rowdiest class. I knew how to keep the class—all fifty-two of them—from rocking off the rails.

I worked with children every summer during my teen years and through college, married at twenty-one, and, still gravitating toward children, became a teacher. So when I became pregnant with my first child, I knew I was going to be a good mom. I was an old hand. And I was eager.

Just after my second son was born, though, I ran into big trouble. I got edgy. I started losing my temper. One day, when my two-year-old made a move to hurt the baby, I lunged at him. I checked myself just a split second before throwing him against the wall. I saw the fear in his eyes, and was shocked at what I had almost done.

One mother, two realities. I was a good mom--except when I wasn't. I was a natural, but also out of control. I'd vowed at a young age that I would never, ever be harsh with a child. And until I had two children, I never was. What had happened to me? What could I do to help myself? My children? I told no one.

One Saturday in 1973, I took a walk with an

acquaintance my age, Jennie Cushnie, who asked me how it was to be a mother. Suddenly, I burst into tears and told her how frightened I was by what was happening to me. I told her my father had been harsh and explosive—he'd been under terrible stress throughout our childhoods—and now I was following in his path! I sobbed uncontrollably in front of this virtual stranger. She just listened to me. She was kind. When I could collect myself, I apologized, but she was unfazed and reassured me that she was pleased to listen.

When I played with my children that afternoon, I felt patience and joy. My whole body felt lighter. The pleasure of parenting was back. I had no angry episodes for weeks afterwards. Whatever it was that she did, *that* was what I'd needed!

Jennie told me she'd taken classes in which people exchanged the favor of listening to one another's hopes and concerns. Slowly, as trust developed, they'd cry and laugh more often. This release of emotion was thought to be especially helpful. That explained why one fifteen-minute cry had helped me so much, and why I had cried with *her*. She knew how to listen, and somehow, I'd known. Listening had helped me regain my patience with my kids, and that's what I wanted, so I jumped in!

My first listening partner was an engineer, a somber guy my age whose wife had just walked out on him. She'd left him with a six-month-old daughter who had Down syndrome. He had no experience with infants, a demanding job, few friends, and no help.

He and I exchanged listening time, an hour each way,

every week for the next twelve years. On my end, family life warmed and lightened quickly. The benefits for my listening partner came more slowly but were just as concrete. We helped one another immensely over the months and years.

Then I had an experience that took my breath away. My two-year-old son Jacob came down with pinkeye. The doctor prescribed drops for several days to heal his oozing eyes. I knew my son would be frightened. I envisioned having to pin his arms down with my knees and lean, dropper in hand, over his struggling body. If it went that way, his trust in me would be undermined three times a day for several days.

When the baby went down for his nap, I decided to try listening to Jacob's feelings about getting drops in his eyes. Perhaps that could help. Being listened to had certainly helped me. I had no idea how this would go, but what was there to lose?

So I showed him the bottle of drops and told him I needed to put some in each eye. He threw himself back on the bed and cried hard. I listened intently, right next to him. I told him the drops would help him get better. He kept crying. When he would slow down, I'd lift him gently up to a sitting position, show him the bottle again, and say, "I need to put these in your eyes. It's going to help you." And every time, he cried hard.

After half an hour of this back-and-forth, I asked him if he wanted to see how the drops were squeezed out. He did. I filled the dropper, raised it, and squeezed drops back into the bottle. He watched, and then threw himself back

on the bed for more crying. It went on like this: demonstration, crying; demonstration, crying.

Then Jacob asked whether he could try squeezing the dropper. After he'd tried it several times, I asked if he was ready for me to put the drops in his eyes. He wailed again, and I stayed close, keeping eye contact and murmuring that I was sorry it was so hard.

A few minutes later, his face cleared. He sat up and asked, "Can I put them in?" Let me tell you, in a hundred years I wouldn't have thought of a two-year-old giving himself eye drops! I said, "Sure, you can try. If you miss, I'll have to help, though." I asked him to lie down, and filled the dropper. I helped him position his hand over his eye. And I watched as he squeezed two drops into his open eye. He did the same for his other eye, then sat up, looked at me and grinned, and ran off to play.

I was astonished! In the following days, putting drops in his eyes was as ordinary as putting socks on his feet. His fear was gone.

Important ideas came together that day. I saw that much of the stress of parenting could be prevented. I'd grown up with good parents whose stress levels had skyrocketed. I had seen the world of hurt a good parent under stress could cause. Parents themselves needed an emotional outlet! And they didn't have to dominate their children. Children could go from balky to cooperative if a parent would listen. Families could be warmer and closer, as ours had become. Parents could trust their children, set necessary expectations, listen and connect, and their children would thrive.

I saw that listening was a way of giving love that was powerful and respectful. And in the end, it got things done. It felt great to parent this way—working *with* my child's feelings, rather than against them. I knew what I wanted to do with my life.

Since then, I've spent most of my waking hours raising our two boys and working to understand how parents can build the kind of support that makes parenting go better. I've had the privilege of working with thousands of parents and children over four decades, learning how parents can lift all kinds of difficulties out of their children's lives by connecting with them and listening to their feelings. The rewards can come quickly, as they did with my son that day, or the process can take some time. Either way, I am sure that we parents have the power to help our children surmount all kinds of hurdles. And by listening to one another, we too can grow.

After seeing again and again the great good that listening could do for parents and their children. I yearned to get the ideas out there where parents could reach them! So in 1989, with the help of friends and supporters, I founded what is now Hand in Hand Parenting as a nonprofit, parent-led organization. It has grown slowly so we could root our work in our own solid experience. We are now helping parents in a big way.

Tosha Schore came to one of my ongoing parent groups in 2005. She has used Hand in Hand Parenting brilliantly to bring her family through many challenges, including illness, trauma, and issues with school. Now the mother of three boys, she is a Trainer with Hand in Hand, and works

internationally as a parent consultant, an advocate for boys, and a blogger. I love her embrace of the nitty-gritty, her fine mind, her courage, and her ability to keep good connections paramount in her parenting. I wanted Tosha's voice in this project.

Listen is grounded in all we've been privileged to learn. We're proud to bring you the true stories of many parents. *Listen* is a Hand in Hand-based team effort to bring you excellent tools for delivering your love to your children. I do hope it is helpful to you.

Patty Wipfler

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