

**An excerpt from *Listen: Five Simple Tools to Meet Your Everyday Parenting Challenges* by Patty Wipfler and Tosha Schore**

Some of our parenting comes from the best of what our parents gave us. Without knowing it, we might channel our father's sweetness at bedtime, or our mother's patience as our child learns to hammer a nail. But some of what we bring to parenting came to us when our parents felt embattled. So after a frustrating day, we might unleash stinging threats like the ones we heard from our father, or yank our child's arm like our mother did ours. And you have probably noticed that though you vow not to yell, spank, or throw flaming tantrums, raw emotion sometimes wins the day. We're good parents, but we can't help but carry some baggage.

**PARENTING IS EMOTIONAL WORK**

You can't predict ahead of time how you will feel once you become a parent. But you *will* have feelings. Big feelings! You'll be swept up by extraordinary hopes and gripping fears, waves of gratitude and bitter resentment, love and hate. There's worry; there's joy. One day, you'll feel proud and confident as you watch your child make a new friend at the park, just like that. But when he wails in pain from an earache at two in the morning, you'll feel pangs of helplessness. When a feeling comes along, it will come on strong.

Still, we can't match our children's emotional chops! Good children don't just cry: they are wracked with sobs. They don't register complaints, they tantrum. Perfectly normal children scream and throw things. They run yelling through the house. They kick. They tremble with rage. Have a child, and you're living with an emotional Beethoven! A genius in the realm of passionate expression.

You can't avoid the emotional work of parenting. Whether you stuff your upset and try to be patient, or let your family see and hear it all, you're engaged in emotional work. You can try to keep on even keel, but we humans don't function that well when we stuff lots of feelings. We can take those highly touted ten deep breaths and manage to keep an upset inside. But after awhile, we start itching for an excuse to show someone how we really feel, and eventually, we lose it. There aren't good conventional choices for handling this emotional work. There's just one thing for sure: whatever our choices, handle it we must.

What can happen to an ordinary family to put a deep stress-print on the parent-child relationship? To fill in a brief sketch of what parents face, I could cite a few real-life examples from just a handful of my relatives. When they were boys, my husband pushed his brother out of their moving car onto the Golden Gate Bridge. His mom had to stop mid-span, run back, and pluck her son up off the highway. My sister became profoundly mentally disabled, and after a year of decline, could not recognize us, or move her body at will. My brother came close to shooting a friend's eye out with a B-B gun. My cousin got rheumatoid arthritis when she was twelve, and was confined to a wheelchair for many months. My uncle, an Air

Force pilot, came back from the war in Southeast Asia too disturbed to be with his daughters, his wife, or anyone. He found no solace; he ended his life.

As you can imagine, every family member involved in these events was wracked with stress. For many of them, scars and grief still remain. And this is just a small sampling from a middle-class clan who wanted for nothing except emotional support.

I hardly know a parent that hasn't faced serious troubles at one time or another. We parents put one foot in front of the other, we keep a good face on at work and while we're out and around. But parenting can wear us down to the nub at any level of economic privilege.

Doing emotional work—finding a way to offload stress and lower the walls we've thrown up to protect ourselves—is not yet a common concept. When we're swept up by feelings and have no emotional support, we lose our compass. We're in a strange land. We don't feel good, we do things we regret, and we're too isolated or ashamed to tell anyone that we're struggling. A small minority of us have crawled, humbled, to a counselor or a support group of some kind. There, our privacy protected, we may have found ourselves choosing to do emotional work as we faced our situation. We may have learned that we weren't alone as we heard the stories of others grappling with similar circumstances. But most of us don't really even track the rumbling of our emotions. We just notice that the older our children get, the testier we become, and the less dear they seem. We tell ourselves that we're probably doing OK, but we spend a lot of energy skirting emotional land mines in order to keep peace in the home.

So on the inside, every one of us is working hard. We have to handle our children's outbursts; we have to deal with our own. We want to help our child when he's been snubbed by a friend; we must cope with our own isolation. We want to help our children with their learning challenges; we have many things to learn about parenting, but where do we go? What can we do to recover when we feel depleted, or too ornery to be good company?

### **THERE IS A WAY FORWARD**

Here's some welcome news: there are good and simple ways to handle the emotional rigors of parenting. You can bring more laughter and fun to your family. You can have the joy of seeing problems disappear because of *your* mothering, *your* fathering. There are tools that can help you.

When you use the Listening Tools we present, you'll have a new way to build your emotional stamina and plump up your support system. Instead of spending lots of energy trying to control your child's behavior, you can focus on building a strong connection with your child, and repair it when it frays. You'll be able to guide him without the traditional carrot or the well-worn stick. The limits you set will actually bring your child closer to you!

You'll discover new aspects of your child's intelligence that you hadn't noticed before. And you'll put your head on your pillow at night, surer that you've met your child's core needs.

Your road won't be free of potholes and hairpin turns. Our society is riddled with enough trouble spots that you're sure to encounter some rough going. But with a clearer perspective, you and your child can get through the hard patches in better shape, with energy to spare.

Here's the framework for parenting that you deserve, and five simple Listening Tools that will bring you closer to your children, and to your own best self.