

Compassionate Connection: Attachment Parenting & Nonviolent Communication

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How do we deal with a two-year-old when he grabs every toy his friend plays with? What do we say to a four-year-old who screams in rage when her baby brother cries? How do we talk with a ten-year-old about the chores he has left undone, again? What strategies will keep our teenager open with us – and safe?

Nonviolent Communication (NVC), sometimes referred to as Compassionate Communication, offers a powerful approach for extending the values of attachment parenting beyond infancy. A process for connecting deeply with ourselves and others, and for creating social change, NVC has been used worldwide in intimate family settings as well as in organizations, schools, prisons, and war-torn countries.

NVC shares two key premises with attachment parenting: Human actions are motivated by attempts to meet needs, and trusting relationships are built through attentiveness to those needs. Both premises contrast with prevailing child rearing practices and with the assumptions about human beings that underlie these practices. Instead of focusing on authority and discipline, attachment parenting and NVC provide theoretical and practical grounds for nurturing compassionate, powerful, and creative children who will have resources to contribute to a peaceful society.

Human Needs And Human Actions

Unlike conventional views of babies as manipulative and in danger of being spoiled, attachment parenting suggests that our babies' cries are always attempts to get their needs met. NVC, too, shifts attention away from judgments about our own and others' actions (as manipulative, wrong, bad, inappropriate – or even good), focusing instead on our own and others' feelings and needs.

Consider the following common situation. A child, Anna, leaves her clothes and toys strewn about the house. Dad may reprimand, remind, offer incentives, or punish. These tactics may or may not lead to the immediate outcome he intends. They will, however, likely result in unwanted long-term outcomes, such as hindering Anna's intrinsic desire to keep her home orderly and impairing the sense of connection and trust in the family.

Anna's mom may choose to say nothing out of confusion about what might work. Not getting her needs met, and lacking trust that her needs even matter to Anna, Mom might feel resentful and frustrated. The relationship is again impaired, and Anna loses the

opportunity to practice finding solutions that will work for everybody – a powerful skill she needs in order to live in harmony with others.

NVC offers parents two key options that foster connection: empathy for others' feelings and needs and expression of one's own. In this situation, Dad can guess – and thus connect with – Anna's deeper feelings and needs. He can ask, "Are you excited because you want to play?" Or, "Are you annoyed because you want to choose what to do with your space?" Often, simply shifting to an empathic guess of the child's feelings and needs eases the parent's reaction. Dad no longer sees Anna as an obstacle to getting his needs met; rather, he is ready to connect with this other human being. For Anna, having the experience of being understood may nurture her willingness to listen to Dad's feelings and needs and to contribute to their fulfillment.

Mom may choose to express her own emotions. She may start with an observation: "I see clothes, books, markers, and toys on the living room floor." The observation, instead of an interpretation or judgment ("The house is a mess"), can make a tremendous difference in Anna's readiness to hear Mom's perspective. Then, when Mom follows with her feelings and needs instead of going immediately to a solution, she humanizes herself to Anna: "I feel frustrated because I enjoy order in the house." Mom clearly expresses that her feelings are caused by her own unmet needs, not by Anna's actions, thereby taking full responsibility for her feelings and for meeting her needs. She continues with a doable request: "Would you be willing to pick up your things and put them in their places?" Or if she wants to explore the broader pattern: "Would you be willing to talk with me about how we can meet your needs for play and choice and my need for order?"

Even if Anna were not willing to talk at that moment, her parents could continue to use empathy and expression until mutually satisfying strategies were found – in that moment or over time. In fact, one of the most profoundly connecting moments in relationships can occur when one person says, "No" and the other empathizes with what that person is implicitly saying "Yes" to: "When you say you don't want to talk about this, is it because you want more confidence that I care about your needs?"

Every interaction we have with our children contains messages about who they are, who we are, and what life is like. The parent who takes a toy away from a toddler who just took it from another child while saying: "No grabbing," teaches her child that grabbing is okay – for those with more power. The parent who unilaterally imposes a curfew implies that his teenager can't be trusted to make thoughtful decisions about his life. Instead, in both words and actions, a parent could convey three key things: I want to understand the needs that led to your actions, I want to express to you the feelings and needs that led to mine, and I want to find strategies that will meet both of our needs.

By hearing the feelings and needs beneath our children's words and behaviors, we offer

them precious gifts. We help them understand, express, and find ways to meet their needs; we model for them the capacity to empathize with others; we give them a vision of a world where everyone's needs matter; and we help them see that many of the desires that human beings cling to – having the room clean “right now”, watching television, making money – are really strategies for meeting deeper needs.

Allowing ourselves to be affected by our children's feelings and needs, we offer ourselves the blessing of finding strategies to meet our needs that are not at a cost to our children. Conversely, by sharing our inner world of feelings and needs with our children, we give them opportunities all too rare in our society: to know their parents well, to discover the effects of their actions without being blamed for them, and to experience the power of contributing to meeting others' needs.

Power With Versus Power Over

When we want our children to do something they don't want to do, it is almost impossible to resist the temptation to use the enormous physical and emotional power we have over them. Yet attempting to coerce a child to do something she doesn't want to do neither works effectively in the short term nor supports our long-term needs. (The only exception comes when there is a threat to health or safety, in which case NVC suggests that we use non-punitive, protective force.)

Marshall Rosenberg, founder and Education Director of the Center for Nonviolent Communication, asks parents two questions to point out the severe limitations of using power-over tactics such as reward and punishment: “What do you want the child to do?” and “What do you want the child's reasons to be for doing so?”¹ Do we really want our child to do something out of fear? Guilt? Shame? Obligation? Desire for reward? Most of us have experienced the deadening effect – and the ensuing anger and resentment – of doing things out of these motivations. Human beings do not respond with joy to force or demands. It follows that if people get their needs met at a cost to others there is an attendant cost to themselves. Our needs are met most fully and consistently when we find strategies that also meet others' needs.

While helping us meet our needs without coercion, NVC also helps us resist giving in to our children's every wish by teaching us to express our feelings, needs, and requests clearly, and to expect our needs to be considered. When we consistently express our commitment to attending to everyone's needs – not just theirs, not just our own – we model a way of life to our children and create power with them: the power of choosing to contribute to making life more wonderful for everyone.

Neither coercive nor permissive, NVC focuses on human needs and helps us realize that we, our children, and all human beings share these needs. I draw profound hope from the

knowledge that by living this way, I can foster harmony in my family – and contribute to peace in our troubled world.

Growing Up With NVC

People often ask me how old children have to be before parents can start using NVC or when it is too late. I reply that we can always use NVC. With babies, NVC may look essentially like attachment parenting, with verbal expression of our own and our babies' feelings and needs. The younger the baby, the more primary her needs; as she grows, so does the possibility of including everyone's needs. Starting NVC with older children raises the challenge of altering existing patterns, but NVC's simplicity and transformative power make the process more accessible. As everyone's skills grow, so does the joy of deeper connection and the relief of parenting in ways more aligned with one's core values and hopes for the world.

NVC doesn't make the challenges of parenting go away. Our child, like most three-year-olds, demands, refuses, hits, and ignores. And like most parents, we sometimes raise our voice, get frustrated, feel helpless, and forget how we want to parent. However, in these challenging moments NVC gives everyone in our family skills that restore communication and connection. In the midst of the daily wrestling with how to meet everyone's needs and how to share our power, our son often expresses his feelings, makes requests, and comes up with creative strategies to meet all our needs. Having grown up with NVC, he seems to have internalized a new paradigm for relationships.

One evening several months ago I was very frustrated and expressed myself quite strongly. My son responded, "I am not enjoying the way that you're telling me your feelings about what's happened," and demonstrated for me the tone of voice I had used. He continued, "I'd like you to say it this way," and demonstrated the tone he would enjoy. Without judgment, my son stated his observations, feelings, and request, with the implied need for respect. I immediately and gladly altered my tone, and two sentences later we snuggled, deeply reconnected.

My son also assumes that parents and children share power. Recently we played that I was his child, scared to go to the doctor. Instead of saying, "You must go," he asked, "Are you willing to go?" "No, I am scared that it will hurt," I answered. Then he said, "The doctor won't hurt you. Now are you willing to go?" Playing a parent, he understood that we were two autonomous human beings, making our own decisions, using the power of words to move toward mutually satisfying outcomes.

In addition, my son is beginning to understand the difference between needs and the strategies we use to meet them. To my: "I'd like to talk with you; would you put down your book while I'm talking?" he replied, "I don't want to." I could have empathized with that

“No,” seeking to understand the needs he was trying to meet, but I chose to express myself more fully: “I don’t feel comfortable talking with you while you’re looking at the book, so would you be willing to put it down?” He answered, “Okay, I’ll put it down in a minute. But first I want to understand why you don’t feel comfortable talking while I’m looking at the book.” Realizing that I had not made my need clear, I said, “Because when I talk I like to know that I am being listened to.” My son then understood my need and saw that we were not in any conflict. He said, “I am listening to you, so you can go ahead and talk.” Once we recognized my need, we could both see that my strategy was not the only way to meet that need.

NVC teaches that all violence is a tragic expression of unmet needs. With the ongoing cycles of violence that devastate our world, it takes great vision and faith to believe that we can find ways to see each other as fully human and to create a world that meets all our needs. Bringing up our children to speak and live the language of compassion, we embrace that vision and participate in creating that world.

1 See “The Protective Use of Force”.

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