

# Encouraging Love and Forgiveness

by

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Most kids would rather be tied to an anthill with honey rubbed all over their naked bodies than to be forced to either hug or apologize to another kid—especially, God forbid, a sibling. I'm not sure why we adults do this. Maybe we think they'll be magically overcome with love or remorse. Maybe we think it's an old Native American custom for becoming life long blood brothers. But whatever our beliefs, they're just delusions. The hugs are stiff variations of strangleholds or limp adaptations of a coma. The apologies are uttered though gritted teeth and stares that promise a painful revenge in the dead of night when they least expect it. That said, this common tactic should be forever nixed.

Love, compassion, and respect between kids should be allowed to develop on its own with only a slight nudge from time to time. We can accomplish much of this by minimizing rivalry and competition, as we have already discussed. And through the changes we make in our adult/child communication, we can also see to it that children grow up in a harmonious environment where everyone is allowed to have their own opinions and ideas, where everyone is comfortable earning acceptance rather than pursuing it out of a desperate need, and where children enjoy each other's approval, but do not need it to be fulfilled and happy. With this foundation of acceptance, inner strength, and harmony, we can then encourage them to experiment with affection—to have the courage to reach beyond their inhibitions and beyond their fears of being in a vulnerable position, emotionally.

I've encouraged experiments like these a number of times with my own kids, with great success, I might add. For instance, one day, my then eight year-old son, Lukas, and my fourteen year-old daughter, Michelle, had a verbal argument that practically rattled the pots and pans from their place in the cupboard and dislodged the caulking between the bathroom tiles. In the end, they both stormed to their own bedrooms in tears. After

about fifteen minutes (when the plaster and dust settled,) I called the ten year-old into another room and said, “I know you don’t want to fight with Michelle. You guys seem to have so much fun when you get along. Would you be open to conducting a little experiment in human behavior?” Loving science as he does—as evidenced by the recent metamorphosis of my kitchen into a look-alike for Dexter’s Laboratory, Lukas agreed. So, I asked him to knock on Michelle’s door. Fortunately, I had coached him to ask, “Can I please come in, Michelle?” in his sweetest prepubescent voice in response to her screaming out, “WHAT DO YOU WANT!” When she said, “OKAY, FINE. COME IN THEN, YOU CREEP!” (She was really curious at this point and was probably hoping he’d beg for forgiveness, promise to be her personal slave for life—well, you know the bit.) Then, he went over to her, gave her a hug, and said, “I’m sorry we’re not getting along,” and left without a word. This last part had two purposes: First, it’s always good to flee the premises in case the whole thing misfires. Second, by leaving, Lukas kept it simple. If he had lingered, Michelle may have wondered if he had some ulterior motive, like wanting to play Zelda with her on her Playstation, borrowing some of her CD’s, and so on. By reaching and then withdrawing, he was proving to her that all he wanted was for things to be okay between them, and that now, the next move was hers. Sure enough, after a few minutes, she came out of her dragon’s cave, threw her arms around him, told him she loved him, and took him by the hand to her room so they could play Zelda together. Afterwards, we discussed how those recent chain of events were proof that kindness is so powerful, it can change someone’s attitude from seething to melting in a matter of seconds.

You can also encourage kids to be good role models with each other, especially the older ones. Give them certain responsibilities like reading bedtime stories to the younger ones, supervising them during play, helping them with their schoolwork, and so on.

Try to enlist kids in responsibilities and other activities they can do cooperatively: “Can you two help cook dinner while I bathe the baby?” or “Maybe you both can wash the dishes while I finish the laundry.”

Seize every opportunity to evoke their feelings of empathy for other children: “Tommy just get scratched by the neighbor’s cat. Do me a favor and get it cleaned up while I call the doctor to schedule an appointment for a tetanus shot.”

Children will soon learn that most friendships come and go. They have arguments and break up, they move away, etc. Use these trying times to discuss how their relationship with their siblings is a lifelong friendship they can always count on, especially if they work hard to maintain it.

To cultivate closeness between siblings, have them sleep in the same room at night—when they’re younger, have them sleep in the same bed (exceptions: cover hogs, snorers, and bedwetters.) When children don’t have an ounce of energy left to wrangle, they can quietly reminisce, share dreams, and revel in “the giggles.”

As a parent, I can’t think of any role as important as raising a loving child. Look at the world around us. It needs all the help it can get, and what better medicine than love?

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