

# Infant Mental Health: Ending the Cycle of Hurt



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**Summary:** Every parent wants to be a good parent. The bad news is that sometimes parents can be overwhelmed from their own issues, which may lead a parent to be upset, sad, angry or emotionally distant from their child. The good news however, is that even if you had a negative past, your child represents an opportunity for a fresh start for a new life, and an opportunity to break any negative cycles from your own past.

## Introduction

Parents who are carrying sad or angry feelings from their past may have a difficult time parenting their children. If we feel upset, sad, angry or even “blank out” a lot of the time, we can be scary or even harmful to our children. This is the last thing any parent wants.

Children who are frightened by things their parents say or do cannot count on their parents for protection. They may show their hurt in different ways. For example, by:

- Being aggressive to people, animals, and themselves
- Not getting along with other children and adults
- “Blanking out”, saying “no” a lot, or not being able to sit still and calm down
- Not feeling good about themselves
- Having difficulty dealing with unpleasant feelings like anger, sadness, jealousy, or fear

Most importantly, when they become parents, they may do things that make their own children feel afraid. In this way they repeat an unhappy cycle of hurt. The good news is that you can break the cycle of hurt by changing your behaviour.

## Five Kinds of Behaviour that Can Hurt Children Emotionally

Parents who behave in these five different ways are not bad parents; they have likely been hurt themselves. When you recognize these behaviours and understand how they can hurt your child, you can avoid them.

1. **Voices:** The voices you use when speaking to your child can be confusing, frightening and harmful, especially when you use these voices over and over again. Loud, angry voices can scare children, even young babies. Growling and whispering, even if done in a playful manner, can make children feel that something dangerous is happening.

**What you can do:** Speak with a soft, calm voice while looking straight into your child’s eyes. This approach

signals to your child that you care.

2. **Not comforting a distressed child:** If you do not try to comfort your child when he or she is distressed at three particular times – when your child is emotionally upset (frightened or sad), physically hurt, or ill – you will give the message that your child cannot count on you to feel safe and loved. Ignoring your crying child, laughing, teasing, or hushing your child in anger are not comforting, and can make the world feel like a scary place.

**What you can do:** When your child is distressed, hold him or her. Speak soothingly in a soft, loving voice. Even if this approach does not stop the crying right away, it gives the message that you care and that the world is a safe place.

3. **Getting in your child's way:** There are many ways you can get in your child's way, like interrupting when your child is speaking, or taking a toy away to look at something you are more interested in. You should never hurt your child on purpose. Games like "I'm going to get you!" or throwing your child into the air, excessive tickling or roughhousing, can also invade your child's space and send a message that your child's feelings and interests don't matter.

**What you can do:** Sit back and watch your child. Join in play when your child invites you. Following your child's lead, even for five minutes a day, lets your child know that his or her space, feelings, and independence matter.

4. **Not being there for your child:** You may have a lot on your mind for many reasons; you may be worried, exhausted, or thinking about something from the past. Sometimes people who have been through a lot "blank out" on occasion. But if you do not respond when your child needs you, your child will feel unsafe and unloved, and may develop serious problems.

**What you can do:** If you notice that your mind is wandering when you are with your child, try to bring your attention back. If you "blank out" often, you may need help dealing with unpleasant past experiences so that you can become more responsive to your child.

5. **Making your child worry about you:** When you turn to your child for comfort or advice, your child will worry about you. It is not up to children to worry about their parents.

**What you can do:** Give your child affection and reassurance and do not burden him or her with your worries.

## Breaking the Cycle of Hurt for Your Child

Every parent sometimes behaves in these five ways, but it is a PATTERN of doing these things that can be harmful. If these behaviours are intense, and they happen over and over again, your child may develop serious problems. Pay attention to what you are saying and doing and try to change your behaviour if you sense your child is distressed or uncomfortable. Do not let hurtful past experiences get in the way of how you relate to your child. If you find that you are having a hard time controlling your own feelings, don't be afraid to ask for help. Whatever happened to you, you can take steps to try and break the cycle of hurt and make life better for your child.

## Authors and Copyright

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## For More Information

Information from this article is excerpted from the video, "A Simple Gift: Ending the Cycle of Hurt". Through no fault of their own, many parents may have grown up in difficult situations which have left them with unhealthy

patterns of interacting with their children. This program helps parents recognize unhealthy patterns so that they may interact with their children in more positive ways.

Video available from Infant Mental Health Promotion (IMP), c/o The Hospital for Sick Children, 555 University Avenue, Toronto, Ontario M5G 1X8, Phone (416) 813-7654 x 1082, Fax (416) 813-2258, [imp.mail@sickkids.ca](mailto:imp.mail@sickkids.ca), <http://www.sickkids.ca/imp>.

## Disclaimer

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This information is general advice only. You may feel that hurtful experiences from your past - or present - are bothering you a lot and making it hard for you to be as good of a parent as you want to be. Or you may feel that your child's behaviour is becoming hard to deal with, or that getting along with your child is difficult. If this is so, reach out and talk to someone you trust. You can talk to your doctor or a public health nurse, or contact your local children's mental health centre for more advice.