# Parenting From *Your Heart*

## Sharing the Gifts of Compassion, Connection, and Choice

*A Presentation of Nonviolent Communication™ ideas and their use by*

**Inbal Kashtan**

PuddleDancer
PRESS

2240 Encinitas Blvd., Ste. D-911, Encinitas, CA 92024
email@PuddleDancer.com • www.PuddleDancer.com

*For additional information:*
Center for Nonviolent Communication
5600 San Francisco Rd., NE, Suite A, Albuquerque, NM 87109
Ph: 505-244-4041 • Fax: 505-247-0414 • Email: cnvc@cnvc.org • Website: www.cnvc.org

ISBN: 978-1-892005-08-3

# *Parenting From Your Heart*

## *Introduction*

How can we deal with our two-year-old when she grabs her friend's toys? What might we say to a four-year-old who refuses to let other children slide on the playground? How can we talk with a teenager about the chores he has left undone—again? How do we protect our children when their choices endanger their safety? What resources will help us work with our own anger, frustration, or pain when communication with our children seems strained or non-existent?

As parents, we are constantly faced with situations like these. Multiply the children and the challenges mount. Add the pressures of work (or unemployment), money (or lack thereof), time, relationships, and other commitments, and the pot threatens to boil over. Then, for some, there are the stresses of raising children alone, without a partner, extended family, or community. And there are myriad additional challenges many parents face. It is no wonder parents yearn for support, guidance, and relief. Yet when we turn to parenting books or experts, the advice we find is often contradictory and may not align with our own values and hopes for our children and families. Even when we do find an idea we want to try, changing habits and patterns in relationships can be enormously challenging in itself.

In this booklet, I present to parents and others who are connected with children a brief introduction to how Nonviolent

Communication™ (NVC) may support their parenting in practical, immediate ways. I particularly hope to address parents' yearning for deeper connection with themselves, their partners, and their children, and their desire to contribute, through parenting, to fostering peace in the world. The approach I describe, as you will see, goes beyond immediate solutions and into the realm of personal and social transformation.

This booklet explores a variety of topics and situations and offers ten exercises to help you put into practice what you are learning as you shift or adapt your parenting approaches. However, it is by no means a comprehensive exploration of NVC and parenting. I have not touched upon many topics that have come up in my workshops and classes, on the NVC-parenting email list, and in my own life. I hope, nonetheless, that what I have covered here will be practical enough to offer you some concrete tools for deepening connection with your children, and exciting enough to encourage you to consider learning even more. If you choose to put these ideas into practice and they make a difference in your family life, I would love to hear from you.

For a review of the basic steps of NVC and additional information on NVC, see the back of the booklet.

## "*Power*-Over" *versus* "*Power*-With"

When parents want children to do something their children don't want to do, it's often tempting to force the children's compliance by using the enormous physical, emotional, and practical power adults have over them (by practical, I mean that adults have much greater access to society's resources and control over the course of their own—and their children's—lives). Yet I am convinced that attempting to coerce a child to do something she or he doesn't want to do neither works effectively in the short term nor supports families' long-term needs. (The only exception comes when there is threat to health or safety, in which case NVC suggests that we use non-punitive, protective force.) In NVC, we refer to using power to enforce what we want as "Power-*Over*," in contrast with using power to meet everyone needs, which we refer to as "Power-*With*."

Maria, a parent who had read some of my articles, asked me a question that points directly to the temptation to use the

control we have over resources to influence a child's behavior (note that all people's names have been changed):

*I've been "bargaining" with my two-year-old son Noel using rewards and consequences, and sometimes it seems to me that it's quite effective. At least, it gets him to do what I want, such as eat the food on his plate. Yet I'm somehow uncomfortable with this. Is there a problem with rewards and consequences if they work?*

I do think that there is a problem with rewards and consequences, because in the long run, they rarely work in the ways we hope. In fact, I think that they are likely to backfire. Marshall Rosenberg explores this point by asking parents two questions: "What do you want your child to do?" and "What do you want your child's reasons to be for doing so?" Parents rarely want their children to do something out of fear of consequences, guilt, shame, obligation, or even a desire for reward.

In this context, when I hear parents—or parenting experts—say that consequences are effective, I often wonder what they mean. I believe "effective" usually means that parents get compliance from children—that children do what parents tell them to do—at least for a while. Both the goal (compliance) and the means (rewards and consequences) come at a price. They not only involve fear, guilt, shame, obligation, or desire for reward, they are also often accompanied by anger or resentment. And because rewards and consequences are *extrinsic* motivations, children become dependent on them and lose touch with their *intrinsic* motivation to meet their own and others' needs.

I believe that the most powerful and joyful *intrinsic* motivation human beings have for taking any action is the desire to meet our own and others' needs. Both children and adults act out of this intrinsic motivation when they feel genuinely connected to themselves and each other, when they trust that their needs matter to the other, and when they experience the freedom to *choose* to contribute to the other.

If we want our children to experience intrinsic motivation for doing what we ask them to do, we can shift our focus away from authority and imposed discipline and toward paying as much attention as possible to everyone's long-term needs. This may take more time in the moment because it means going beyond

the present problem and remembering what matters most in the big picture. Yet the time is worth the investment. In the long run, families can experience deeper connection, trust, and harmony, and children can learn powerful life skills. I believe that most parents find these goals much more appealing and exciting than mere compliance.

Instead of rewards and consequences, NVC offers three starting places for connecting with others: offering empathy, expressing one's own observations, feelings, needs, and requests, and connecting with oneself through self-empathy. In the next three sections, I will explore each of these options in relation to the question Maria asked me.

## Empathy for a Child

Empathizing with another person opens the door to deep understanding and connection. When Maria approaches Noel, she can begin with the premise that some of his needs are not being met. Even with a toddler or a child not used to NVC language, a parent is likely to be able to ferret out his needs.

When Noel pushes his food away or says "no," Maria can try to understand how he feels and the needs he is trying to meet instead of trying to change his actions. She can ask herself silently: Is he saying no to the food because he's trying to meet his need for pleasure—does he dislike the food? Is he distracted by other things and so wants to meet a need to focus on what's interesting to him? Is he annoyed because he needs autonomy—to choose what and when to eat? Perhaps he is not hungry, and so feels confused because he needs trust in his ability to recognize his own body's cues?

Having connected mentally with her son's needs, Maria may consider checking her understanding with him to see if any of these guesses fit. She may ask, for example: "Are you frustrated because you want food you enjoy more?" "Are you distracted? You want to pay attention to your game?" "Are you annoyed because *you* want to choose when to eat?" The language can be simplified if the parent is concerned that the child might not understand. But it is important to keep in mind that toddlers understand more than they can verbalize. Furthermore, by

including feelings and needs in their vocabulary, parents are teaching children emotional literacy. Even if the child doesn't reply, many parents will notice that their own tone of voice and body language have changed simply because they have connected with the child's needs—and that a potential power struggle has been defused. Now Maria can move on to seek strategies that could meet both people's needs.

In giving empathy, I encourage people to let go of the specific aim of getting their children to do what they want in the specific way they want it done, and instead, to focus on connecting with their children. At the same time, it is equally important for parents to stay in touch with their own underlying needs. Maria may consider what, if anything, she'd be willing to do differently to increase the likelihood of meeting her son's needs without giving up on her needs. Integrating her child's needs into her strategies could include changing the daily menu, offering food somewhere in the house where her son can eat as he plays, creating and eating playful, colorful food together, and many more. The strategy doesn't matter as much as being attuned to both her own and her child's needs. In this way, by attending to her child's underlying needs, she would also be attending to her own. There is ultimately no conflict between their needs—they just have different strategies and priorities at that moment.

### Sharing One's Own Experience

In using NVC, creating a quality of connection that enables everyone to have their needs met is the priority. Sometimes this means empathizing with the child's needs, but other times it means paying close attention to how parents express themselves. When they pause to reflect on what they have been communicating, parents frequently discover that they have been repeating what they want their child to do ("I said, stop playing and eat your food!"), but their child often tunes them out. Instead, parents can express their full experience in that moment: what they are responding to (an observation), their feelings, their needs, and then what they would like from the child. Most people—children included—are more open to

considering one another when they understand each other's underlying feelings and needs, because they connect with the human being behind the request.

When Noel won't eat, Maria might say: "When I see you pushing the food on the table and not putting it in your mouth, I'm worried because I'd like to help your body be strong and healthy. Would you be willing to eat what's on your plate?" The catch here is, since most human beings have a huge need for autonomy—especially when we fear our need for autonomy won't be met—it's possible that her son will say no! This is precisely the reason that I wouldn't want to force him. I believe that the more children hear demands, the less they want to do what parents ask of them. The result is that both parents and children miss the joy of cooperation and mutual consideration. Therefore, how Maria responds to the "no" is pivotal to nurturing Noel's trust in her willingness to embrace both her needs *and* his. She may choose to empathize with her son, or she may choose to express her own feelings and needs again. This time she might say, "I feel frustrated because I need more ease and cooperation around meal times," or "I'm confused. I'd like to understand what you want to do."

Each expression in NVC ends with a request that usually begins, "Would you be willing to . . . ?" Asking for a reply maintains the flow of dialogue about a problem. Yet often I find that parents repeat the same request, which tells me that they are still very intent on getting the child to do exactly what they want her or him to do. The child often senses that and objects even more strenuously. So another helpful focus for dealing with "no" is to pay attention to the *kinds* of requests parents make. Maria can take notice of what she is saying once again: Is she repeating the request to eat? If so, then it is likely that Noel hears this as a demand. She can then try to consider other strategies for meeting her needs and ask for that. For example, she might ask Noel if he'd be willing to tell her *when* he'd like to eat. He might say five minutes. Then she can set a timer, and in five minutes he has met his need for choice and will likely sit down to eat in good spirits.

## Self-Empathy

Self-empathy in NVC means checking in with your own feelings and needs. This may seem odd at first, but I and many other NVC practitioners have found it profoundly effective for increasing self-acceptance, self-connection, and inner peace. Just taking a minute before reacting can reduce anger and prevent a power struggle!

If Maria chooses to start with self-empathy, her inner dialogue may sound something like this: "Wow, I'm feeling so stressed out! I want to rest. Plus I'm worried because I need confidence that Noel is getting the nutrition his body needs. And I'm so frustrated because I'd like cooperation around caring for his health. I'm also troubled because I need to understand what's going on for him—I really have no idea!" It may take Maria some time to recognize her feelings and needs but with practice, she will learn to connect with herself more easily.

Having gotten clearer about her needs, Maria can now consider what she would like to do. Each of her needs might be fulfilled through a variety of different strategies. Would she want to empathize with Noel to try to understand what's going on for him? Express her feelings, needs, and requests to him? Consult with Noel's physician about whether to worry about how much he's eating? Talk with her partner or friends about it? Read a book about toddlers and eating? Give Noel more choice about what to eat? Play together with his food? Again, strategies that come from understanding her needs are more likely to meet those needs.

I don't know anyone who was brought up practicing self-empathy. The novelty of self-empathy, combined with the effort it takes to make time for it, can make it seem like an impossible luxury. Yet self-empathy can give us "breathing room" for facing life, much like a meditation practice. While it may not solve every problem, it may actually help us accept the times when we cannot find a "fix." Through self-empathy, we can provide for ourselves some very powerful resources: connection and nurturing for ourselves; focus on what matters most to us; access to creative problem-solving; space to grow and deepen our skills as parents; confidence that we will act

more often in ways that bring us joy and satisfaction; and the sweetest thing of all: trust and connection with our loved ones.

## Why Take the Time for Connection?

The ways parents interact with their children contribute to shaping children's understanding of themselves, their parents, human nature, and the world around them. A parent who takes a toy away from a toddler who had just taken it from another child, while saying, "No grabbing," teaches both children that grabbing is OK—for those with more power. A parent who unilaterally imposes a curfew implies that a teenager can't be trusted to make thoughtful decisions about his life. Instead, in both words and actions, parents can convey two key ideas: (1) Everyone's needs matter, and (2) If we connect sufficiently, we can find strategies that will work for everyone.

By hearing the feelings and needs beneath our children's words and behaviors, we can offer them precious gifts. We can help them understand, express, and find ways to meet their needs; model for them the capacity to empathize with others; give them a vision of a world where everyone's needs matter; and 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. Children can learn that by taking time to discover their deeper needs, they are more likely to devise strategies that are truly likely to meet those needs.

There is a further blessing when we allow ourselves to be affected by our children's feelings and needs: we can find strategies to meet our needs that are not at a cost to our children. This eases a great deal of pain many of us experience when we think that we must accept strategies that work only for us but not for our children.

Lastly, 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 and joy of contributing to meeting others' needs.