

# REST STOP PARENTING

## THE IMPORTANCE OF DRAWING NEAR TO YOUR CHILD AS YOU DISCIPLINE

*By Dr. Jeffrey Olrick*

“Wahhhhaaaaawaahhhaahhawaah!” An unrelenting wail filled my car, drowning out the Wiggles and any other lame attempt I made to calm down my 2 year old son, Joshua. The two of us were taking a short trip together and, wanting to get an early start, I had woken Joshua up from his nap and plopped him right in to the car. He wasn’t taking the transition well. Frustrated and beginning to lose my calm as well, I finally pulled over at a highway rest stop. I climbed into the back seat of the car, unbuckled my little guy from the seat, and held him to me. We didn’t talk at all—I just held him, and he just held on to me. After a few minutes I asked him if he was ready to keep going. He said yes and we were able to continue on our way, this time at peace.

The mistake I made in that long ago trip was that I neglected the fact that Joshua is a kid who doesn’t take transitions well. He has to be eased into them—he always has, and he probably always will. But this known fact about my son didn’t fit into my travel plans. As an adult, I wanted the trip to be as efficient as possible, forgetting that small children and efficiency don’t often go together. Instead, I stressed out Joshua and myself in the process. And I actually added time to our journey, because I had to go back and correct my mistake of not transitioning him before we left.

The concept of Rest Stop Parenting was born out of that literal highway rest stop experience. Children of all ages need rest stops—times when their parents are willing to pull off of the metaphorical highway that they are rushing down and be with their kids in a manner that helps them regain emotional and behavioral self-control. In infancy, a Rest Stop consists of cueing your child about danger (e.g., "Don't touch!"), removing him from danger or trouble, and being comforting or empathizing as he reacts to your limit setting (e.g., "I know! You're mad! You wanted to touch it! But you can't touch the plug" or "That was scary when Mom said 'No!' But you can't touch the plug. It's OK, Mommy is here.").

By the age of 2 years-old, most children have matured sufficiently that Rest Stops can now be implemented in a fashion that allows your child to take greater ownership of his actions and develop insight into his emotional life. A Rest Stop begins as a simple time out—the child is removed to a consistent spot—perhaps the stairs, a bedroom, or a comfortable chair. Time spent alone, as in time-out, is an effective tool for getting a child to calm down after an altercation and to collect himself enough to rejoin the family or group. But time alone without follow up cannot teach a child why he acts as he does or equip him with the tools to make better choices in the future. And it does nothing to repair whatever relational damage was done by his behavior. In Rest Stop, the parent tells the child to think about what happened, why she is being sent away, and to let him know when she is ready to return. This is the first major difference between a time-out and a Rest Stop—the child sets the amount of time that she spends away. If she is very upset, she may want to be away for a significant amount of time. If she is ready to address the issue quickly, it could be as short as 30 seconds. Once she has indicated that she is ready to rejoin normal activities, the parent then goes through a simple conversational process with her to make sure that she understands what occurred, what emotions are fueling her behavior, how she can handle those emotions differently, and that she is welcomed back to

you. I have termed this process N.E.A.R. because the goal of it is to teach her how to live near to you and others in peace and good relational health.

### **N: Name it! Taking ownership.**

This should be the easy part. Your child needs to be able to articulate why he had to have a Rest Stop. It is essential that your child be able to name and take ownership of the behavior. Being able to do so is his primary responsibility and the first step toward ending the Rest Stop.

### **E: Emotions. The heart of the matter.**

Once your child is able to identify and own the behavior which initiated the Rest Stop, help him identify the emotional, or heart, cause for his behavior. The guiding principle here is that our outward actions always reflect our inward heart. Sometimes, the heart cause will be as simple as irritability caused by hunger, tiredness, or sickness. If this is the case, pointing out the fact will equip your child to be more aware of his body and respond to it by seeking food, rest, or comfort before trouble starts. More often, the heart cause is emotional, such as anger, disappointment, sadness, fear, anxiety, jealousy, or craving. Children are not born with an awareness of these different, and often subtle, feeling states and they certainly are not aware of how they might impact their behavior. Instead, the young child's emotional experience is pretty narrowly defined as "I feel good" or "I feel bad." Moving beyond this level of understanding is an acquired skill. Your child needs you to instruct him in this area.

"Why did you..." "I don't know!" As a parent, it is important to understand that your child may not be able to identify the emotions underlying his behavior. In fact, presume that he doesn't. "Why did you...?" then becomes a question the two of you will explore together, with you acting as the experienced guide. Doing so takes time and is work for you, but you know your child best and your life experiences will help you to navigate these waters. You may need to suggest hypotheses to him based on your knowledge of him as a person and things going on in his life. It is okay if he does not accept your hypotheses at first, especially if they involve deeper emotional hurts. Simply suggesting them communicates the important message that it would be valid for him to feel that way under the circumstances, even if his behavioral response is unacceptable.

As an example, let's say your son hits his brother while they are playing together. You direct him to take a Rest Stop and, after letting you know he's ready to accept responsibility for his actions, your son tells you that he hit his brother because his brother took his toy. In the case of a simple conflict this often is as far as it goes, and you can move on from there by helping him recognize that he was angry but needs to find new ways of handling his heart in such situations. However, if after considering the situation you suspect a more complex reason for the behavior, by all means explore the possibility with your child. Let's say your son's aggression, in this case, is actually the culmination of a morning of irritability marked by negative and provocative behaviors directed primarily at his brother. By taking a step back and looking at the big picture, you realize that he may be feeling upset and jealous that his brother got to do something special with their Dad this past weekend. It is highly unlikely that your child will be able to make that connection on his own, but hypothesizing it out loud teaches him that such a connection is possible and valid, even if he dismisses it in this case. And once aware of that possibility, he is more likely to attend to his heart reaction ("I'm feeling sad and jealous that my brother gets to do something special with Dad") and initiate a more constructive response ("If I let Dad know how I'm feeling, maybe we can do something special, too") when similar situations arise in the future. In this

regard, it is important to keep in mind the major life events and struggles that may be effecting your child's emotional life. Family conflict, divorce, loss, academic difficulties, peer rejection, seeing a scary movie, and many other large and small events in the life of your child are sure to effect his heart, and by extension, his actions. Your child needs you, in your wisdom and delight for him, to help him make those connections. Remember, exploring the confusing world of the heart is a collaborative journey. "Let's figure this out together" is where your child needs to start.

Identifying the emotion behind the behavior is not only a useful tool for the child, but it is an invaluable tool for the parent as well. Taking time to consider the emotional cause behind your child's behavior will help you as a parent shift focus, concentrating more on who your child is as a person than on a particular behavior. Using this method will help you understand how best to nurture your child, and to guide him as he grows. If you skip this step and instead limit your focus to your child's behavior, as punishments such as time-out tend to do, you will miss out on the opportunity to shape your child's heart. Without nurturing and shaping your child's heart, you can be sure that the behavior will only resurface in some similar form to be dealt with again later.

Many parents, especially those who did not themselves have good emotional guidance, may feel poorly equipped to delve into the emotional life of their child. Do not fear. However little you may think you know about emotions is far more than your child does. In any case, it is helpful to have a cheatsheet of emotions to post on the refrigerator door for everybody to look at and consider. [Click here for a copy you can print out, or just look at.](#)

#### **A: Alternatives. Hope for the future.**

This is the problem-solving phase. Together, you and your child will search for what I call heart solutions. Having identified the heart cause for your child's behavior, this is your opportunity to equip your child with new responses to the particular emotion which precipitated the current behavior. The focus is on your child's emotions, and healthy ways of responding to them, not on your expectations and what he needs to do to satisfy them. Simply saying, "You just need to do what I tell you to do" or "You need to treat your brother nicely" does not equip a child to master his emotions. Instead, they become rules which your child will be doomed to break with the result being feelings of shame and incompetence. What your child needs are strategies for meeting the goal, not a reiteration of the rules to follow. The most effective solutions will likely be the ones your child thinks of himself. Your child may tell you that he will share with you when he is upset, lie down when he is tired, or tell the truth instead of lying. Encourage this! It may not mean that you will never have to deal with this issue again, but it should be an encouraging indication to you that your child has begun to consider his behavior and recognize that he has choices. Once your child demonstrates investment in the problem solving process by offering his own solutions, he will be much more likely to consider and incorporate your ideas and suggestions, no doubt gleaned from a lifetime of struggles with the very same emotions. Keep in mind that, because we are relational beings, hugs, encouragement and communication are essential heart solution tools. Don't be shy about encouraging your child to use them. Knowing how to seek comfort and reassurance from a trusted caregiver when distressed is perhaps the most important developmental skill a child acquires.

#### **R: Restoration. Putting the past behind us.**

By this point, you and your child have determined how his heart, or emotions, precipitated a behavior that was unhealthy, and developed ideas for responding differently when the same or similar emotion arises in the future. But your work is not yet finished. In having precipitated the

Rest Stop by some behavior, your child has more than likely acted in such a way as to cause a relational fracture. This can be as explicit as having hit someone, or as subtle as having broken trust in a relationship by lying. This is also true for simple disobedience, which is rebellion against your authority as a parent. Whatever the nature of the issue, insofar as it is relational (and, again, most discipline issues are), the need for restoration still remains. Insight and understanding, the products of your interaction so far, equip him for the future but do not release him into it. Forgiveness sets your child free from the burden of guilt, shame, and bitterness which may have accumulated as a result of his behavior and your interactions with him because of it. Teach your child to say sorry and be emphatic in saying "I forgive you. Now give me a hug and let's start over." For children who have trouble with the words "I'm sorry", measure their countenance. Most parents can tell when their child is remorseful. If your child clearly is, simply respond to their non-verbal cues and let him know you forgive him.

The process of initiating a Rest Stop is a process of drawing your child NEAR to you and others in his or her life by nurturing personal responsibility (I acted in a way that is not ok), emotional awareness (I hit my brother because I was jealous and frustrated), hope (When I am upset, I can act in different ways to make me feel better, like asking for a hug or for some time to myself), and forgiveness (I know you still love me even though I hurt my brother.) Repeating the Rest Stop process as opportunities arise will, over time, empower your child to take personal responsibility for his actions and live in peace with himself and others. He will understand better his own heart, develop solutions for meeting his heart needs, and experience the power of forgiveness that sets him free from the shame of his mistakes.

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