



Using Peak Living Network Principles with Children

Are children a regular part of your life? Whether you are a parent, grandparent, daycare provider, or family friend you can apply the central principles from *The Joyous Recovery* and the Peak Living Network to enhance your relationships with young people and to facilitate their healing from the emotional wounds that life brings.

Most of the concepts from the book, in fact, require no modification in order to bring them into children's lives. One of the central concepts of *The Joyous Recovery* is that children are already full human beings; they are not preparing to become human beings. Practice referring to children as "people." Notice how unfamiliar and odd it feels, and reflect on why that's true.

All Peak Living Network principles apply to children and teens. That means we need to talk to them with respect, as equals. We need to dramatically improve how well we listen to them. We need to stop flooding them with advice and "wisdom," stop giving philosophical responses to their pains and discomforts. We need to recognize how deep their emotional pain is — it is every bit as deep as ours. We need to recognize their need for emotional healing.

Perhaps partly due to my career in the human service world, I all too often hear adults saying, "Children are resilient. They can work through things. They bounce back." Although these statements are true strictly speaking, they are also misleading and insensitive. Children suffer terribly when painful losses, invasions, and injustices happen in their lives. The above statements are often used as a way for adults to distance themselves from that suffering, to decide that it isn't really so bad, to gloss over it.

Furthermore, children's resilience is in no way guaranteed. As the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) study showed so persuasively, children carry permanent harm from their emotional injuries unless they get the opportunity to heal from them. They carry those effects right into adulthood, with a toll taken on their happiness, their relationships, and their physical health. If you doubt it, read the study. Healing is not automatic and inevitable; it only happens when the right conditions arise in the child's life — just as is true for an adult.



FIRST AND MOST CRUCIAL POINT: QUIT STOPPING CHILDREN FROM CRYING

One of the greatest causes of misery in the life of a parent — perhaps the biggest cause of all for some — is the effort to stop children from crying. If we could make this one change in how we raise children, our experience of parenting would be as different as the change from desert to jungle — and the lives of children would completely change.

Here's how a typical "Steven is having a bad day" kind of day tends to go. (I'm using a son in this example because boys tend to be denied crying even more than girls are, but even girls are barely permitted to cry.) The four-year-old boy doesn't seem quite himself at breakfast, and after his bowl of cereal he announces, "I want a cookie!" His parents peer at him like he has two heads. "When," Dad says with immediate exasperation, "have you *ever* had a cookie at breakfast? You're out of your mind."

But Steven's mind appears to be made up, and he demands over and over again, and then starts to pound his fist on the table. Both of his parents yell at him to cut it out, and he bursts into tears. They ignore him for as long as they can, but five minutes later he is still crying and throwing things. Dad leaves the room furiously, leaving Mom to deal with the situation, including the two older siblings to get ready for school. She is at the end of her wits, so she tells Steven that he can have a cookie "just this once" as long as he promises to settle down right away. He squeaks out his agreement, grabs the biggest cookie he can find, and dives into it.

In the afternoon, Mom picks Steven up from pre-school after she gets out of work, and as they're leaving the teacher takes Mom aside to let her know that Steven has been a behavior problem all day. She balls him out on the drive home for misbehaving at school. Steven starts to cry. She tells him he's not going to get out of this by crying, and that he'd better cut the crying out right away or he's going to be in even bigger trouble. So he chokes himself off.

After dinner, Steven knocks down an elaborate farm scenario that his seven-year-old sister has created with toy animals. He starts crying when he gets yelled at, leading Dad



to say to him, "What are *you* crying about? You knock Anna's toys over and *you're* crying? Get up in your room right now!"

Steven lies up in his bed miserably sobbing his eyes out for quite a while. He keeps trying to stop crying, but he can't hold it back and he keeps bursting into tears again. When he can finally stop he emerges and manages to be a fairly normal part of family life for the rest of the evening.

Sound familiar? Many parents will recognize Steven's Bad Day as one of many that they have lived. None of it needed to happen. Steven's problem through this whole day was simply this: *he needed to have a big, deep cry, while feeling loved and supported.* That's it, that's the whole deal.

There could be any number of reasons why he needed this cry. Children need a big, hysterical, melt-down kind of cry at least once or twice *a week*, and sometimes more. (In fact, we all do, adults of all ages included.) During a stressful period or following a trauma, many children need to "fall apart" and cry hard roughly once *per day*. If this need is understood and supported, and the child is offered some physical closeness or holding and treated with kindness and respect, the needed cry will happen and then everything will be okay after that; both parent and child will enjoy their day.

Did Steven know that he needed a cry? Not exactly. A four-year-old is not likely to have that level of internal awareness. (Most adults don't realize that their crabbiness is coming from the need for a good melt-down, so we can't expect children to know.) But a powerful unconscious force is driving Steven to angrily demand a cookie *precisely because on some level he knows the demand will be denied.* He is trying, without realizing it, to set up an opportunity – an excuse, you might say – to have a good cry. *Deep inside he knows he really needs it.* If his parents had held firm in denying the cookie, but also had been loving toward him while he pitched his fit, he would have poured out the tears he needed to be free of, and the whole rest of the day would have gone in a much sunnier direction.

Since Steven got stopped from crying in the morning – by being given a cookie that he did not need – he felt driven to create other potentially cathartic situations throughout



the day. He continued to try every few hours, not only making his own life miserable but taking a number of other children and adults down with him at home and at school.

He did finally get a little of the release he needed, upstairs alone on his bed. But children don't cry nearly as much as they really need to if they are forced to be alone and unsupported while they do it, and furthermore when they have already absorbed a lot of shame about needing to cry. And on the long road to finally getting to have this (partial) melt-down, Steven has accumulated more hurt, shame, disapproval and criticism from adults, guilt about how he has treated others (because hurting other people *feels bad*), and painful loneliness. The cost has been too high.

Children need to be both permitted and supported to cry as often as they need to, as deeply as they need to, and as long as they need to. Supporting them includes looking at them in a loving way, and putting a caring hand on them unless they don't want that. If they are crying hard, they will usually need and want to be held.

Not that it's important not to give into the child's unreasonable demands. For example, if a girl starts to cry because she's told that it's her turn to clean up the entryway to the house, and she cries about it for twenty minutes, be there for her and love her. But afterwards *make sure she does her chore*. This is crucial. By doing so you ensure that crying remains a path to healing and empowerment rather than having it get mixed up with hopelessness, victimization, or manipulation. In this way you also communicate to your child that you see her as a strong person, and that crying has nothing to do with weakness; in effect, you're saying to her, "I know you needed a good cry, but I also know you're a strong person and you can totally handle tidying up the entryway now."

The result of proceeding in this way is usually that the child will have an extended cry or tantrum. These are essential innate healing releases that I explain in detail in Chapter 8 of *The Joyous Recovery*. These are actually by far the most important healing experiences in the child's life. They may go on for 10 or 20 or 30 minutes, which will feel like an extraordinarily long time to the adult, but are actually entirely normal and healthful – in fact essential. Crying or tantrums may sometimes go on as long as an hour, although in my experience doesn't happen often even in children who are facing serious trauma in their lives.



Adults find it hard to listen supportively to children's crying or tantrums, largely because the children's releases are triggering our feelings of desperate need for the same releases. Our response to those triggers is typically to become angry or annoyed. Our perception of time also gets distorted, so that when a child has been crying for ten minutes we feel like it's been half an hour.

I want to emphasize that children who are allowed and supported (the love and support are key for this to work) to cry deeply and at length become *less* whiny, *less* likely to fall apart over small things, and *more* cooperative. In other words, exactly the opposite happens of what adults tend to fear will happen. I've had numerous adults say to me, for example, "Well, I can't have my child think that s/he can just go bursting into tears every time there's the slightest disappointment or frustration in life, and that's what s/he's going to learn if I put up with that." But that isn't what actually happens — try it and you'll see.

The confusion is coming partly from the mistaken belief that children *want to* fall apart, and therefore will constantly do so if we "allow it." But children want to be well, just like adults. *When they try to cry, they're attempting to heal, they're not trying to get away with something.*

OTHER POINTS IN APPLYING PLN PRINCIPLES WITH CHILDREN AND TEENS

1) Just as *The Joyous Recovery* discouraged you from analyzing adults, it's best not to analyze kids — no one likes to be analyzed unless they're requesting it. Avoid telling kids what you think they're "really" feelings, and avoid telling them that you think what they're feeling "is really about something else." Kids, like adults, feel disrespected and controlled when someone else tells them what they're supposedly feeling, and will often respond angrily, as they have every right to do. If their feelings are connected to other feelings, that's for them to discover and express. If you have an agenda — namely, that you believe they are carrying another injury that you would like them to work through — I can assure you that you're much more likely to get your wish by letting them feel what they need to feel now, and let them follow their own path to where those feelings lead.

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Another way to think about this is: If today is the right day for them process some connected issue, which may indeed be older or deeper than what their immediate feelings are about, their own feeling path will take them there. If you give them love and support, but they stay right in the feelings that are about today's events, then that's what they need to do.

When my daughter was three years old, a neighbor's dog got into our yard, started playing with my daughter's favorite inflatable ball, and popped it. She saw it happen out the window, and she cried absolutely hysterically for a long time, perhaps as much as half an hour. Then she shifted — with no lead from us — into crying about how much she missed a young cousin that she used to be in daycare with every day. Then, a little later, something quite remarkable happened: she started to speak aloud to the dog, as if the dog were with us (but obviously understanding that it wasn't), saying repeatedly, "It's okay Serge, I crying I miss Sophie." (She wasn't saying the word "because" yet at that point.) She didn't want the dog to feel bad about how hard she'd been crying about the popped ball!

We never interpreted her feelings for her at any point in the process of that evening. And if we had, our analysis would have just gotten in the way. Kids know, though it may be largely unconscious, what they need to do. Love them, respect them, avoid condescension, and stay out of their way. They'll get to where they need to get.

2) Similarly, don't tell kids, "I think you need a good cry." A comment of that kind doesn't help the cry to happen; all it does is make the child feel like they have no emotional privacy.

3) When kids break into tears during the evening, it's because they need to cry, not because they need to sleep. (After they cry, they may also need to sleep, of course.) Being tired is not causing them to need to cry; rather, it's that being tired is creating a space where they feel the grief they've accumulated over the course of the day. Please don't disrespect them by saying, "Ooh, someone needs to go to bed," or similar comments, which make kids feel put down and belittle their distresses. After they cry, they may be ready for bed, or they may get a new burst of energy and want to keep going for a while.



4) If you start to cry in front of a child – especially your own – he or she may well need some reassurance that you’re okay. Adults generally avoid crying in front of kids, with the unfortunate result that when they do cry, kids assume that something really terrible must be happening. This is a chance to model for them that a person can be crying and yet solidly strong at the same time, countering the message that crying is a sign of weakness or crisis. Just say to the child, “I’m fine, I’m just getting some sadness out of me that needs to come out,” and keep on crying.

5) Don’t talk kids out of their feelings (with reason, with philosophy, and so forth), don’t minimize their feelings, and don’t poke fun at their feelings. Children feel their distresses every bit as intensely as adults do, and often more so. And their reasons for being in pain are every bit as valid and important as adults’ reasons are.

I could write volumes more about this point, but I’ve already discussed it in detail in Chapters 2 and 18 of *The Joyous Recovery*. I hope you will read those if you haven’t already.

6) Treating someone *equally* does not mean treating them *the same*; this is a point about which there is commonly confusion. Children are of equal value to adults, and deserve equally to be taken seriously, but they have different needs in a number of ways. One need that children have is for adults to be in charge.

What I’m asking for is unfamiliar to many adults, and may take some practice. On the one hand, I’m asking you to listen more carefully to kids, to take their opinions much more seriously than normally happens, and to give their preferences much more weight than normally happens. I’m asking you to stop constantly teaching them things; just teach them two or three things a day, and otherwise just let them learn by watching and let them be kids. I’m asking you to learn *from* them; on a typical day, your kids should teach you as much as you teach them. (My children in many ways have made me the person I am today — I’m not exaggerating.)

On the other hand, I’m asking you to continue being the final authority, and thus not to turn decision-making over to children nor abdicate your adult role. Strive to increase your flexibility, respect, and responsiveness, but continue to remain at the helm. On a



deep level, kids want that; they want to feel safe and protected, they want the sense that adults know what they're doing and are running the show.

Unfortunately, many adults think we have to choose between being disrespectful and dictatorial on the one hand and being kind of wishy-washy on the other. This is a false choice; there's no need to do either of these things.

Teenagers are in their own category. At this stage in life, they still need adults to be in charge, but many of their decisions do need to be turned over to them. You can't just turn someone loose the day they turn 18 years old and expect them to be ready to exercise consistently good judgment; help them get ready for that day by letting them make more and more of the judgment calls the closer they get to their majority.

A FINAL THOUGHT

Adults in our times feel a tremendous responsibility to make their children smart and successful, and to impress everyone with how polite and well-behaved their kids are. There is one piece in here that does matter — children really do need to be guided to be thoughtful of others, just as adults need to be — but the rest can largely be let go of. Adults spend way too much of their time with kids nowadays teaching them things, making points, improving the child morally, and just generally trying to make the child better. These efforts are largely failing to increase children's well-being; in fact, they're largely contributing to children's stress.

Children and teens, like adults, are mostly fine. I would love to see you stop trying to fix and improve them. Most of what you see as a problem will take care of itself over time if the child is respected, loved, and permitted to heal, especially through crying and the other innate releases. (See Chapter 8 of *The Joyous Recovery*.) When children are behaving disrespectfully toward you or toward someone else, or are being insensitive about the effects of their actions, interrupt their behavior with firm authority, making it clear that you are setting a limit that isn't negotiable; but do so without criticism or condescension, and then move on.



I find adults in general kinder to children and teens than they were when I was a kid, but not any more genuinely respectful than they were then. They still seem to feel that they have to talk to children in some kind of special voice (which communicates condescension loudly and clearly, and seems to say "I assume you aren't very bright!"), when actually it works much better if you speak entirely normally but just avoid big words. Adults typically do better at not being scary than they did when I was young, so that's a good trend. But it's okay to be angry with kids; in fact, being angry is often more respectful than the kind of insulting tones that I hear adults take with kids in an exaggerated effort to avoid sounding angry. Your anger won't scare kids unless you are intimidating them, which you can learn not to by watching your volume and body language.

Spend most of your time with kids, especially your own, having fun with them. Everything can be fun; breakfast, brushing teeth, driving in the car, getting ready for bed, the whole ball of wax. I made plenty of mistakes as a parent, but this is one area where I can say I consistently did really well; I kept asking myself, all day every day, "How could we make this fun?" And you know what? Between my contributions and my children's contributions, we almost always found a way.

(Except maybe with homework. Don't get me started on homework; we adults should consider ourselves lucky that, for most of us, our bosses don't get to send us home with things we have to do for another hour or two in the evening after we've finally gotten off work.)

See if you can allow your children to influence your life as much as you influence theirs. They can help you learn:

- * *How to live in the moment, focused on what you're doing now*
- * *How to love everything you do, how to make things fun*
- * *How to be spontaneous and creative*
- * *How to be affectionate*
- * *How to be funny and how to appreciate other people's humor (kids so often have great senses of humor, beginning at the youngest of ages)*



Children and teens can also teach you specific skills and interests. Open yourself to learning about things that they're learning about, and to getting excited about things that they're excited about. Revel with them in the magic of childhood, and see how much of that magic can spill over into the adult world.

We adults really need it.