

**BARBARA BURROWS**  
**PARENTING**

**M A G A Z I N E**

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**Almost walking! • The party's over • I HATE my teacher! I'm NOT going to school!  
The "Mothering" teacher • Hold on to your kids • Mother love  
Very successful 10-year-old cries about everything • Another fight on the street**

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**WHAT'S UP?**

# Finding Mother

**WHEN MY KIDS** were young I use to read them the popular children's book entitled, "Are You My Mother?" The story has a lost bird asking various obscure and inanimate objects if they are his mother...until by the end of the book, he finally finds her.

The other day my oldest, who is going into her fourth year of university, was looking for her mother. It's not that she had been hunting around the house asking the odd chair or telephone if it were me. Turns out she wanted dinner and I was too busy to cook. When she asked me about it, I said, "sorry, make yourself something, I have to run". And that's when she said, "Aw come on, be a mother." On the inside I fell apart; on the outside, I just looked at her rummaging through the cupboard for a box of KD and realized she wouldn't starve as I jetted out the door.

I have always believed that good mothers are supposed to make meals, clean house, shop, do laundry, help with work term reports, and more and more. This summer, I took on a short term, but full-time consulting job as well as finishing up the last few stages of a project on another job. Next to keeping up with getting to work on time and home again at the end of the day, I'm not good for much else. As a super-hero-wanna-be, I actually started this new job, fully intending to keep up with everything else that used to take me all day around the house, including nutritious homemade meals, even if it was a packed lunch. In the beginning I did.

Then I realized that I was the only one in the house who was still worried about everyone and everything. No one else was tidying up when I couldn't. No one else was doing the shopping or laundry when I didn't. No one else offered to make dinner. They were coming and going as they liked, when

they liked. One night I made dinner for the crew and they all announced they would be various and sundry places, and not home to eat. That's when I gave up and decided to do what made me happy and let the almost-adults look after themselves. No more shopping, no more cooking - unless I wanted to, no more laundry - unless I need my clothes cleaned and theirs got thrown in at the same time, no more tasty homemade dinners - IT'S OFF TO THE GYM FOR ME! For a few days, no one seemed to notice.



**ANGELA GREENWAY**  
Managing Editor

I've been much more relaxed about the house, the clothes, the food, who is where and how they are getting home. I try not to care about the sloppy house or the laundry not put away. I have stopped nagging about the bedroom mess. I only do what I have to and the rest, well...it can wait. I was pretty sure the approach was

working for me.

That was until the kids started looking for their mother. It made me realize that as grown up as they are, they aren't really old enough for me to abandon my role completely. The guilt hit me like a brick, as I raced out to the gym listening to "Aw come on, be a mother". They may not really "need" me as small children need their mothers, but the aren't ready to let go of the little bit of getting looking after they still enjoy when they are home for the summer.

Tonight on my way home from the office I am going to pick up some food and cook it for dinner, take the wash downstairs and do it, put away the laundry, and pass on the gym. Tonight I will be the mother that are looking for... And I sure hope they are home to notice!

*Angela*

# Teenager plunges downhill – step mom asks for help

**Dear Barbara:**

*Please help us understand our 17-year-old teenager. I am her step-mom and quite concerned. Up until the age of 14 she lived with her Mom and boyfriend and 3 younger siblings. Now she lives with her father, me and my three children. Things seemed to be going fine until this past school year (grade 11) when she started hanging around with “skateboarder” kids and all hell has broke loose. Her marks have plummeted; she’s dating a boy with 3 lip rings who has been asked to leave the last 2 schools he’s attended. He has come here from another city. She is madly in love with this loser, I’m afraid she’ll try and kill herself when he dumps her, and he will. He has a reputation.*

*She is highly allergic to metal in her skin; last May she got her bellybutton pierced. It has never healed properly. Her Dad asked her not to get her tongue pierced, but of course she went and did it anyway. I guess this explains the 10 pounds she has recently lost. We have had several good conversations in the last few weeks; she did confess to trying drugs and alcohol. Her marks are low. Her grandfather has promised her a car and to pay her insurance if she passes her classes next term. Is there anything we can do to get our “old” daughter back? As a step-mom should I back off? Should we try and talk my father-in-law out of the car business?*

**Dear Step-Mom,**

**I THINK THAT** your step-daughter feels terribly alienated from your new family and also from her mother’s. Teenagers do feel alienated even when living with their original families as they pull away and strive to become more independent, but this girl feels more “on the outside” than most. Her alliance with another troubled boy suggests that she is feeling like she belongs nowhere so she clings to another person who really doesn’t seem to “belong” anywhere.

The body piercing, although very common, can represent an unconscious wish to hurt one’s own body. This could suggest that your step-daughter is feeling guilty. Poor marks, failure to achieve also suggests guilt - the teen simply doesn’t feel worthy of success so doesn’t do the hard work required to achieve it. Her weight loss could also suggest an inner despair. Guilt could come from her anger at feeling she doesn’t belong.

All of these troubles indicate that therapy might be helpful, but few teens have a strong enough sense of self that they can admit their pain; they rarely ask for help.

I don’t think that a car (which is intended as a positive motivator) would be helpful. When teens are given more that they feel they deserve, their guilt increases. I know of two cases where teens totaled cars due to their simmering guilt (and thankfully were unhurt).

Try and find ways to keep inviting this girl back into the family, no matter how often she rejects your efforts. She needs to know you aren’t giving up on her - no matter how awful the boyfriend is and how many rings she puts into her body.



Photo by Murray Fellowe

**BARBARA BURROWS**  
*Director,*  
**Barbara Burrows**  
*Parenting*



WHAT'S UP? .....2

DEAR BARBARA .....3  
**Teenager plunges downhill –  
step mom asks for help**

TIP FOR BABIES .....4  
**Almost walking!**

TIPS FOR TOTS .....4  
**The party's over**

TIP FOR KIDS .....5  
**I HATE my teacher!  
I'm NOT going to school!**

TIPS FOR CLASS .....5  
**The “Mothering” teacher**

GOOD BOOKS .....6  
**Hold on to your kids**  
*by Wendy Leigh-Bell*

LETTERS .....7

FEATURES  
**Mother love**  
*by Andrea J. Buchanan*  
.....8

**Very successful 10-year-old  
cries about everything**  
.....11

WHAT'S HAPPENING IN CLASS  
**Ashley's love-hate relationship  
at school**  
.....13

**Another fight on the street**  
.....14



## Almost walking!

*Penelope Leach, in Baby and Child, offers some suggestions for a baby close to walking. She says:*

- Don't put shoes on a newly standing baby. He does not need shoes to support his feet, but only for protection once he is walking freely outdoors. Bare feet allow for greater sensation on toes and feet and give a better grip.
- Make sure socks have non-slip bottoms - ordinary socks turn hardwood floors into a skating rink. Slipping will undermine your baby's confidence. For warmth, use non-slip socks.
- Don't try to make the baby walk by holding his hands. He will likely feel safer doing his cruising around something solid, rather than holding wobbly hands in an open space.
- Trying to hurry a baby may slow a baby's efforts to learn to walk by causing falls that may make him afraid.

## The party's over

**ADULTS KNOW, WHEN** they must leave an enjoyable party before it is over, that they will have other opportunities to experience similar pleasure again. Therefore, they are able to leave without feeling and acting too upset.

The younger children are, the less capacity they have to understand that when they must leave a pleasurable experience, that indeed, they will have other similar experiences. When parents move them away from a fun experience, they often collapse, crying and fighting to stay. Young children, at times, simply cannot tolerate the frustration of being taken away from their fun without experiencing an almost frantic sense of frustration and loss.

Parents can help children cope during these transition times, and help a child to leave without "falling apart",

by offering an alternative "pleasure" when the child must leave.

For example, a toddler might be enjoying playing at the park, or a ride on a merry-go-round. When it is time to leave, if the toddler looks as if he might not be able to handle moving on without becoming badly upset, a parent

**If the toddler's attention can be redirected to something else, he can often be moved on without being excessively upset.**

might keep an interesting small wind-up toy, a tasty candy, a balloon to blow up or anything else that can offer the toddler a little bit of enjoyment. Parents need only "change the subject" briefly. If the toddler's attention can be redirected to something else, he can

often be moved on without being excessively upset. Once the move forward has occurred, and the merry-go-round or park is behind the child, often the child is able to regain the composure he nearly lost. He can carry on with the activities of the day.





## I HATE my teacher! I'm NOT going to school!

Barbara Burrows

**ADJUSTING TO SCHOOL** after being home for the summer is difficult for some children, especially in the early grades. Both parents and teachers can help children in this transition by realizing young children need to transfer some of their trust from their mother and father to the teacher at school. This can take time, and if your child has trouble with this adjustment, he might refuse to go to school. He might perceive the teacher as “mean”. Feeling shy and uncertain, everything feels “mean” to him. His comments are likely not a realistic evaluation of his teacher.

One thing that can help a child who does not want to go to school is to get to know the teacher better, especially if this can be done in his mother's presence. Make arrangements for the child to spend some time in the classroom with his mother and teacher both there. Do not suggest you are coming to find out “what is making your child unhappy”. Instead, ask for a visit for both of you to get to know the

**Make arrangements for the child to spend some time in the classroom with his mother and teacher both there.**

teacher better. Encourage the child to choose some treats to take. How about some cookies from the bakery or a Popsicle for each of you?

Ask the teacher ahead of time if (s)he could have provide an activity or game that might interest your child. The idea is to let your child discover, while feeling more secure with his mom there, that this class is not scary and the teacher is not mean.

If your child needs more than one visit with you to feel secure enough to “go it alone”, volunteer to come into the classroom after school to help the teacher get ready for the next day. Get your child to help too.

Work together, getting to know the teacher, so both of you feel good about your child's new classroom.

But what if mom works outside the home? A couple of hours missed from work in September can save days of trouble further on in the school year. Even for working moms, finding a way to help a child make a secure and good investment in school during the first few weeks is time very well spent.

## The “Mothering” teacher

**A TEACHER WHO** truly enjoys children may feel the urge to “mother” children, especially children who obviously need and want a close emotional relationship with a mothering person because they have a disturbed relationship with their own mother.

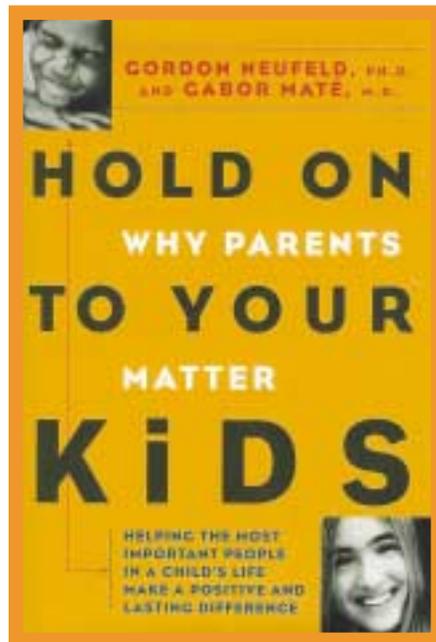
Surprisingly, “mothering” may not be the best way for a kind and loving teacher to help a troubled child. No matter how warmly a teacher relates to a child, the teacher can never provide what the child wants from a mother. The teacher leaves at the end of the day, spends week-ends away, does not cook for the child, or care for her when she is sick. Erna Furman, in “Helping Children Grow” explains that when a teacher “mothers” a child it creates new problems for the child, rather than making the child feel more secure. As the child gets closer to the teacher, she hopes for more and more love.

It is hard for a teacher not to be very flattered when a child shows

continued on page 7



# HOLD ON TO YOUR KIDS



**Hold On To Your Kids:  
Why Parents Matter,**

**Gordon Neufeld Ph.D, and  
Gabor Maté, M.D.**

**Alfred A. Knopf, Canada, 2004.**

**Price: \$35 Cdn**

**Pages: 315 + notes and index = 332**

**ISBN: 0-676-97471-6**

By Wendy Leigh-Bell

**AS MANY OF** my acquaintance will attest, my enthusiasm for this book has no bounds. Many of the observations made by Canadian authors Gordon Neufeld and Gabor Maté are ones we have made ourselves. Despite dealing with a large topic, the authors make effective use of analogies to make concepts accessible to the non-academic reader. Personal anecdotes from the authors' clinical practice and their own children clarify well-researched points.

The book is about the ways in which human parents and children form attachments of a very basic, primitive sort. We are led through the evolutionary significance of Parent/Child attachment and its effect on the structure/function of the brain, the implications for societies and cultures both past and present, and contemporary North American versus European societies. There are chapters on maturation, learning (or lack thereof), bully-

## WHY PARENTS MATTER

ing, sexuality, and the concept of psychologically safe sex, and, finally, after a disturbing reality check, chapters on what can be done.

Children should form their primary attachments to their parents; however, there is an increasing trend towards children becoming peer-oriented rather than parent/adult oriented. When a child is parent-oriented, he/she can rest assured that the parent will always 'be there'. Children lack the maturity to offer the steadfast nature of parental love. Peer rejection, while hurtful to the parent-oriented, is devastating to the peer-oriented. Thus the peer-oriented child anxiously, desperately tries to maintain an attachment that can never offer the assurance of parent-orientation.

A large part of the book is devoted

to the concept of maturity, its development, ways in which peer-orientation contributes to a child's failure to mature, and implications for the affected individual. The authors show that by following many conventional ideas about day-care, public education, socialization of children, we are actually increasing the risk that children will become peer-oriented.

One symptom of peer-orientation many are all too familiar with is belligerent behaviour by children directed at the adults in their lives. The author points out the futility of punitive measures and instead urges us to work at strengthening the relationship with the child. The authors describe orientation as having properties of a compass or magnet, attracted to one pole and repelled from the other. Thus in the peer-oriented child the belligerence is a natural, instinctive consequence of an abnormal attachment.

In the latter two chapters we are given many practical tips on how to spot the symptoms of peer-orientation and ways to prevent its occurrence or deal with it once it occurs. Having convinced us of the alarming prevalence of peer-orientation among today's children and young adults, the authors reassure us that we are not entirely without a repertoire of tactics. I found the book to be very thought provoking and would recommend it to anyone interested in exploring their role as parent, teacher, or people watcher. **BBPM**

**Re: Fourteen going to party with drinking - [www.barbaraburrows.com](http://www.barbaraburrows.com) column June 4/04**

**Barbara,**

Just responding to your article in today's paper about the sound advice that you gave to the parent concerned about the drinking age. As a student in college taking an Addiction Counselling Course, we need to make parents realize that harm reduction is necessary for these children.

I can totally understand where you are coming from and we need to educate parents, as well as the public population, about issue's like these that arise.

*Thanks and keep up the good work.*

**Karen Kell**

**Dear Ms. Burrows,**

I read with interest your June 4th column in the Windsor Star, on 14 year old wanting to drink at the party.

I'm writing today to share with you information about "Talk to your kids about alcohol" ([www.talk-tokidsaboutalcohol.ca](http://www.talk-tokidsaboutalcohol.ca)), an interactive, Web-based micro-site for parents of preteens developed by the LCBO and MADD Canada.

The LCBO and MADD Canada believe that parent-child communications are key in preparing kids to make smart and healthy choices. The 2003 Centre for Addiction and Mental Health Ontario Student Drug Use Survey showed that, on average, Ontario preteens first drink alcohol at 13 so, ideally, parents should be discussing this topic with them before then.

The site encourages and assists parents to help start or enhance the dialogue about alcohol with their preteens by offering tips on talking with kids, identifying and using teachable moments, myths and facts about alcohol, and links to a variety of organizations and useful Web sites.

The site was launched at the end of March 2004 on a pilot basis when MADD Canada e-mailed the site to Ontarians who have signed up for its

information service. The site, which is available in HTML or FLASH, includes a "Pass to a Parent" feature that makes it easy for recipients to pass it on to others they think may be interested. We hope to add additional components and links to the site in the future and to offer it in French. This initiative is just the latest in the LCBO's efforts to prevent underage drinking and sales to minors - a year-round responsibility LCBO employees take very seriously. Last year alone, LCBO store staff challenged more than 1.2 million individuals and refused service to over 68,000 for failing to produce valid proof of age or appearing to be intoxicated. Two-thirds of refusals were for age-related reasons.

I hope you will find the new LCBO/MADD Canada micro-site initiative of interest. We would be most appreciative of any feedback you may have on this project or suggestions for changes or new components.

*Sincerely,*

**Elizabeth Kruzel**

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**Re: 13-year-old is embarrassed - especially around mother [www.barbaraburrows.com](http://www.barbaraburrows.com) Column June 25, 2004**

**Dear Barbara**

I am writing about the girl who gets embarrassed with her mother. It sounds like this is excessive and a product of anxiety. Her self-esteem and sense of boundaries are way under-developed. She would benefit

from counseling aimed at these two issues and at reducing her anxiety.

*Thanks*

**Dominic Boyd MSW**

**Windsor, ON**

**Re: Is Mom causing son's unhappiness? [www.barbaraburows.com](http://www.barbaraburows.com) Column July 9/04**

**Dear Barbara**

I think you missed obvious problem ...his teeth hurt. Maybe mom brushes his teeth too hard. Maybe his teeth hurt when he chews solid food. Maybe she should take him to a dentist.

**C.C.**

**Windsor ON**

**"Tip for Class"** continued from page 5

how much she likes the teacher, but in the long run, letting a relationship with a child get too close only creates new frustrations and disappointments for the child. No matter how much empathy a teacher feels for a child, at the end of the school year, the teacher's attentions turn to a new class with new children who may need her. Although a perfectly normal process, moving to a new grade feels like rejection to a child who wants the teacher to truly love her. Ms. Furman suggests that a teacher can benefit a child best by establishing a friendly, respectful, and professional relationship whereby student and teacher keep some emotional distance and focus on the important work they have to do together - finding a way to help the child progress academically.

If the teacher-student relationship focuses on this common goal, the child can move on, feeling a sense of accomplishment and joy in her relationship with her teacher, not a profound sense of loss at the end of the school year with the loss of a substitute mother.



# Mother

**WHEN I WAS** first married, I taught piano out of our home. One of my students was a woman named Jeannie, who had received the gift of piano lessons — and an upright Yamaha piano to practice on — in celebration of her fiftieth birthday. So nervous that she had her husband call to arrange her first lesson, she was nonetheless excited about finally having the chance to fulfill a lifetime goal of learning to play. At her first lesson, she perched on the bench as if she weren't really supposed to be there, sitting gingerly on the edge, her feet on the floor, ready to run, if need be. She couldn't bring herself to actually touch the keys.

"Your piano's so beautiful," she told me. "I don't know if I can do this."

"Sure you can," I told her. "Just press a key down and it'll make a sound."

That's all it takes."

She brought her right hand up, let it hover close to the synthetic ivories, and finally dropped it back to her side. "You don't understand," she said. "I really can't do this."

"Okay," I told her. "We don't have to play right away. We can just sit here. We can talk about playing."

She laughed. "I know it sounds ridiculous, but I just can't bring myself to play even a note. You don't understand — you're so young, younger than my kids even." She turned to me. "This is probably the first thing, the first thing ever in my life that I've done that's just about me. The first thing I've ever done for myself as an adult, the first thing that's not about my kids. I don't know how to explain it to you, but I just feel like if it's not for my kids, I don't really deserve to be doing it."

We talked for a while about what a big deal it was to learn something new, especially as an adult, and how empowering it could be to learn the piano, an instrument she'd always wanted to play, just for herself, for no one else. She admitted that her kids had gone in with her husband on the gift of the piano and lessons, and I got her to reluctantly agree that possibly, in some small way, then, taking lessons and playing really was about doing something for her kids, not just about doing something, selfishly, for herself. It wasn't until she convinced herself that the lessons would benefit her kids as much as herself — by making them happy that she was enjoying their birthday gift — that she could bring herself to depress a single key.

Week after week, she made progress, from being able to

## Andrea J. Buchanan

*Andrea J. Buchanan, is a writer whose book of essays on motherhood, **Mother Shock: Loving Every (Other) Minute of It** (Seal Press 2003), is available wherever books are sold. Watch for a review of this book in the October 2004 issue of *Barbara Burrows Parenting Magazine*. Before becoming a mother, Andrea was a classical pianist. Her last recital was at Carnegie Hall's Weill Recital Hall, back before she knew how to play the Teletubbies theme song. You can read more about her adventures in motherland in her weblog at <http://www.mothershock.com/weblog>. For more information about the book, visit [mothershock.com](http://mothershock.com)*

# Love

touch the keyboard at her weekly lesson to finally admitting she'd gotten up the courage to take the dust cover off her own piano and actually play a few notes at home, alone. Soon she was able to play a few easy melodies, and her joy over her accomplishment was infectious. "Oh, my kids aren't going to believe this!" she'd tell me, after successfully making it through "London Bridge."

As her lessons progressed, I heard more about her children, about her life as a young single mom, raising them on her own. She told me stories about what it was like in her neighborhood with two kids in diapers, living in a four-story walkup, juggling work and trying to be around to tend to her kids' every need. She told me about her parents and her relatives, how her father forbade her to go to college, and how determined she had been to make a better life for her kids. At fifty, she was petite and energetic; I could only imagine her intensity as a young mother, the necessary effort it must have taken to do everything that she did and still have a huge Italian home-cooked dinner on the table every night without fail.

By the time she was able to play a simple Bach minuet — an amazing achievement for a woman terrified to even touch the keys at her first lesson — we had moved beyond a teacher-student relationship. She was a mother figure to both me and my husband, bringing us food, giving us recipes and crowing over our individual accom-

plishments. I looked forward to her lessons as much for the excitement of watching her make such great progress musically as for hearing more stories of her life of willing sacrifice as a mom. It was something utterly unfamiliar to me.

She somehow managed to fit the stereotype of the martyred mother, giving and giving of herself until there was seemingly nothing left, without actually being that stereotype. She wasn't claustrophobia-inducing or clinging; she hadn't driven her kids away —

**Would I fall in love with my baby  
at first sight  
the way I'd heard I should?**

**What if I didn't?**

**What if I couldn't?**

**What if I loved her but she  
couldn't love me?**

on the contrary, they loved her and seemed to reciprocate her exhaustive efforts at making their lives better. The cards 'they sent her for Mother's Day and her birthday were heartfelt and sentimental, not the printed Hallmark ready-made pap with a hastily scribbled signature that I might send, if I remembered. She was selfless without being overbearing, loving without being suffocating, supportive without being cloying. She was a mystery to me, the kind of mom I'd heard about but never imagined actually existed.

When I became pregnant with my daughter, Jeannie's stories and experience took on a more practical relevance for me. I had so many questions about what mothering would be like: What does it mean to love as a mother? Is it all selfless sacrifice, giving until you have nothing left? Or is it enough just to love and have a little of yourself left over? Is it food on the table every night, doing something special for your child's birthday, leaving little notes in her lunchbox? Or is just being there enough, giving your baby a roof over her head and clean sheets beneath her as she sleeps?

Would I fall in love with my baby at first sight the way I'd heard I should? What if I didn't? What if I couldn't? What if I loved her but she couldn't love me? The most troubling part of all those questions was that until my own child was born, I could only answer them as a daughter. The deeper question of how I would be as a mother could not fully be answered until I already was one, already loving or hating, succeeding or failing, or otherwise living through those questions. I wanted to be more than just a "good enough" mother, but could I really be like Jeannie? Could I be that selfless? I worried I was far too selfish to do what she had done, that I was too selfish to make sacrifices, too childish to do what it seemed mothers need to do. And yet, if I really was too selfish, too childish, how was I supposed to be a mother? Are mothers even allowed those kinds of feelings?

A few days after I came home from the hospital with Emi, I sobbed in my bed as the postpartum reality hit that I was irrevocably, permanently a mother. Gil came in, concerned. "Do you want me to do something?" he asked. I couldn't stop crying. "Yes," I managed to choke out. "Call Jeannie."

Though it had been years since we had stopped our lessons, with my moving to Philadelphia and her moving to upstate New York, we still kept in touch.

In those early postpartum weeks

# Mother love

we spoke often. She became my role-model mother, in a sense. When things seemed too incredible, too overwhelming, I'd remind myself: if Jeannie did it on her own, lugging two kids up four flights of stairs on her ninety-five-pound frame, washing out two sets of eternally soiled cloth diapers ten times a day, doing laundry without a machine and cooking big Italian dinners, then I can do it here, in my elevator building, with my helpful husband, disposable diapers and one kid. If Jeannie could forge a healthy family from scratch, so can I.

When she was finally able to come visit, when Emi was two months old, she was reassuring. "You're doing great, hon," she told me. "You're a natural." When I confessed to her that I wasn't sure if I was cut out for motherhood, that I didn't know if I could love the way a mother was supposed to love, she told me, "Of course you can, sweetie. Look at her, look at this little darling. What's not to love? She's gorgeous, she's perfect. She's just like you." She gave me a hug and told me, "Listen, we all just figure this out as we go along. There's no textbook, there's no rules, there's no right way to love her. You just feel what you feel, you just love her the only way you know how."

I was reminded of the intensity of what I had felt in the delivery room after Emi was born. When my daughter was handed to me for the first time, when I finally had her in my arms after all those months of wondering and waiting, I felt the way I imagine Jeannie must have felt finally sitting at her very first piano lesson — excited, afraid, unsure of what to do, unsure of the ability to do it. When I finally held my daughter, the sense of simultaneous panic and relief was overwhelming. For until I physically touched her, I hadn't fully realized the enormity of



**"You just love her the way you do,"  
Jeannie told me.**

**"And she'll love you right back,  
you'll see."**

what we both had accomplished: she had been born, I had birthed her. There was so much that could have gone wrong but didn't, and the fact of our both being alive and healthy made me feel as though we had escaped some deadly fate, at least for the time being. I felt overpoweringly grateful for the very fact of her, unworthy of our mutual health, undeserving of having made it through relatively unscathed. Perhaps this was the mother love I had been wondering about, this ferocity of thankfulness, this intense imperative to protect her from whatever the world may have in store, this determination

to honor the horrible what-could-have-beens by making the most of what is. I did not fall in love with my daughter the instant I saw her way I had heard other people do, the way I had seen it portrayed in the movies. I marveled at her, at the incredible realization that it was up to me to take care of her, and I felt myself silently pledge to protect her at all costs. Perhaps this was what love was. Perhaps, until I got the hang of it, that kind of love would be enough.

"You just love her the way you do," Jeannie told me. "And she'll love you right back, you'll see."

It was difficult to believe that in the early days of motherhood. In the beginning, there was no reciprocation, no response, just spit-up and burps and dirty diapers, no way to know if anything I was doing was forging some sort of love connection. My baby's range of emotion was crying or not crying. Used to more complexity, I tended to equate that with not loving or loving. "Please don't cry," I'd plead with her. "I love you." But she never seemed to hear me. I was convinced she wasn't connected to me, sure she seemed happier with other people.

Now, when I look back at the videos we shot back before she had discovered free will, I am struck by how obvious and intense her connection to me appears. I am struck by how even at barely three months her eyes follow me frantically when I move out of the frame, how her whole body quivers at the sound of my voice. Now I can see what I couldn't then: how attached she was, how clearly I was her whole world. I see myself on camera acting the part of the mom and I remember how I wondered at the time whether she could see right through me, so afraid that she might not connect with me. And yet there it is on camera,

despite all my ambivalence, all my doubts to the contrary: her absolute devotion, right from the start.

In some ways love is easier as my daughter gets older. For one thing I have more feedback, more proof that my love is reciprocated, in her spontaneous declarations of, "Mommy, I love you so much!" or "Mommy, I love your green eyes." Of course, in some ways, in retrospect, it was easier to love when she was tiny, speechless and helpless, unable to stubbornly refuse to go to bed on time or throw a public tantrum when denied something she wanted. But I am learning as I find my way through the extremes of selflessness and fear that mothering and loving is complex at every stage, a tangled clutch of intense emotion utterly different from any adult love I have experienced.

Jeannie's break away from motherhood into piano lessons was every bit as tenuous and unfamiliar as my induction into motherhood and away from my normal, un-selfless life. Seven years after her first lesson, Jeannie is less conflicted about devoting time and energy to practicing piano, about the un-kid focused joy she experiences when she is finally able to play the "Moonlight Sonata." In fact, her piano lessons led to other risk-taking lessons. She has gone back to school to earn a college degree, something else she never imagined doing. And three years after my first introduction to motherhood, I too am less conflicted, able to embrace the complexity of loving as a mother without being dogged by fears of failure, of rejection.

Jeannie's piano lessons were lessons for both of us.

"How's my little doll?" Jeannie asks of Emily when she calls these days. "Still amazing? Still beautiful? How could she not be, with a great mother like you? Don't you just love her so much?"

And I do. Powerfully, incredibly, more intensely and more selflessly than I ever could have imagined. **BBPM**



## Very successful 10-year-old cries about everything

*This discussion between a mother of a 10-year-old and Barbara Burrows explores the boy's unexplained crying.*

### **A Mother writes:**

I'm a thirty-seven-year-old, single mom. I have a ten-year-old boy. My son's dad and I got divorced when he was just one year old. My son does see his dad regularly (every other weekend and every Wednesday night). My son is very well behaved, polite, does great in school, is very talented in music. I can go on and on, as I'm sure you know.

The one problem that I haven't been able to help him overcome is his crying! He's a sore loser. He would prefer not to play a game, if he thinks that he's not going to win. He told me yesterday that the kids in school call him "cry baby". He's just very sensitive, and always has been. He cries if gets hurt in the smallest way. He cries while playing any group sports, because he always feels like the coach and the players are being unfair to him.

I have never raised my hand to my son. When he was about four, I raised my voice in anger. That hurt me more than it hurt him, so that was the first and last time that happened. I talk to him and explain everything. We can talk to each other for hours, not only about the things that happen during our day, but about our feelings.

Thank you in advance for your help.

### **Barbara responds:**

Your son might need help with his negative emotions. Often tears come when one has trouble getting feelings out in more appropriate ways. It sounds as if you have worked very hard to keep in control yourself (commendable) but in fact, your son needs to know that you are OK with his powerful emotions and your own before he can "feel" his own deep and strong feelings within.

Of course, "feeling" is much easier said than done. If emotions are kept well in control, one may not even be aware of them. I would listen for signs of frustration, upset, resentment, disappointment or anger and encourage him to express these

feelings with whatever words suit him. Hate would be a positive word for your son to use. It would mean that he could put a word to a deep and real feeling. Perhaps that verbal expression would help him get to some of the feelings that are now spilling out in tears.

It may help to ease up on some of the closeness you have with him. Offer him lots of love and support, but talking together in an intimate way may make him feel that you are lonely. This can cause the child to worry and feel responsible deep down. The worry over you may burden him and can lead to tears.

Let him work on his teary problem a little bit more on his own - be there when he asks, but encourage him to take charge of the feelings that make him teary himself.

**Mother:**

I must say that you hit this one right on the spot! My son tells me that he's not allowed to use the word "hate" in his dad's house. If he does, his step-mother says, "Now we don't hate anything, do we? You could dislike something, but you don't hate it!"

Since my son told me that, this has become a joke between us. Every time one of us says the word "hate", the other one responds with this line. Usually before I get a chance, he realizes that I'm about to say it, and he says "don't you dare" and we both start laughing.

When I do say it, my son playfully pushes or jumps on me to get me to stop. I realize the last time I said it, his pushing and hitting wasn't very playful. He elbowed me on my side as he was trying to push me, and he wasn't really laughing about it. I waited a few minutes and asked him if it bothers him when I say it, and he said yes, very much. I told him that I was just playing around because it made him laugh, but I'll stop if it bothers him.

You're also right about the closeness. The fact is that I'm lonely. He is pretty much the only person I talk to. I always thought by talking to him and

explaining my feelings to him, he would learn how to put his own feelings into words. I hate to even admit this, but he still sleeps in my bed. I've tried getting him to sleep in his own bed by buying him a new bedroom set that he choose himself, but that only worked for about one week.

If I don't share my thoughts with him and talk to him, what do we do on our time together? I can't let him stay in his room all day and play video games!

How do I get him to release his anger? I know that he's having a hard time when he goes to his dad's house. He thinks that he doesn't get a fair treatment, they always yell at him and he can't do anything right. I don't think that it's all that bad at his dad's house.

**Barbara:**

It seems you've already sensed yourself what your son needs. You have some ideas as to how to ease things for your son between the two of you. The first was aiming at him sleeping in his own bed.

You also picked up his anger at you when you were teasing. Ask him more about what upsets him. See if you can draw more from him about his feelings. This is how you can help him express his feelings and thoughts more fully.

It is also very important for you to keep thinking about your own needs. What can you do for yourself to address your lonely feelings? If you are able to find a way to feel less lonely, it may ease your son's worries.

I agreed that leaving him to play video games won't help much. Can you help him develop friendships of his own? Are there other boys that he likes to play with?

**Mother:**

He does have some friends from school that live close to us. I don't feel comfortable letting him sleep over at anyone's house, but everyone is welcome to sleep at our house. We have at

least couple of sleepover parties per year. My son does have a hard time making friends. He always has one or maybe two close friends. The rest are his friends' siblings or their friends. He doesn't feel very popular among the guys, but with the girls he knows that he is popular. It's mainly because he doesn't want to play anything unless he's sure that he can win. He told me that some kids at school call him a cry baby. He even admits that no one cries as much as he does.

So we're back to where we've started. I've just got to find a way to get him stop crying. I don't know if I would necessarily want him to show his anger. I mean, how does one show anger? By hitting things, throwing things, slamming doors, cussing.... There's got to be an acceptable way of having him show his anger. Or another cure for the constant crying. Should I get him a punching bag?

**Barbara:**

Remember, we are talking about using words to express anger (or sadness, frustration, despair, boredom etc.) One expresses feelings by putting words to the strong tensions that well up inside ... and becoming more aware of these feelings as they occur. Helping a child identify hidden (or repressed) emotion is a difficult task.

From what you've said, it doesn't sound like he is the kind of child who would enjoy a punching bag.

You have insightfully realized that he is angry, not only at his father's home, but also when playing with you. Continue to work on ways that you can have good things in your life other than him, and encourage him to have good things in his life other than you. Release him from being your confidant. You two are on the brink of a new stage of development. It is time for some more changes. Good luck with this important work as you and your son move forward to another stage. **BBPM**

*Accounts here are written by parents who have attended Barbara Burrows Parenting programs.*

*The stories are submitted anonymously to protect the confidentiality of the children. Thank you to the parents who have taken the time to share their experiences.*

# Ashley's love-hate relationship at school



**THE FIRST DAY** of school was a delight. Our daughter, Ashley, was beside herself with excitement. She was dressed, breakfasted and ready long before she needed to go to call on her friends to walk to school. After she left, filled with excitement, my husband and I looked at each other. Could this be our daughter, the one who was so upset with school in grade one that we peeled her out of our arms and placed her into the teacher's arms crying? The one who has been "if—ee" throughout grade two and three? How could we have reached this stage by grade four?

I thought back to grade one. I did not know what to do. Ashley was terribly upset about going to school and we could not figure out why. The method of forcing her against her will did not seem right — but if we did not force her, we really did not feel she would ever go to school.

Force her we did! I handed her from my arms to the teacher's arms and hurried down the hall of the school, listening to my daughter cry in her classroom. I did not feel at all assured by the words of the social worker who witnessed the scene. "It is the only way to handle school anxiety, she'll adjust quickly. Try not to be upset."

"Am I over-protective?" I asked myself. "Is this professional giving me good advice?" The answer to both questions was, "I don't think so."

What was I to do? This approach of leaving her in the classroom crying day after day just isn't right. As I drove away, I turned on the radio, and heard a talk show with Barbara Burrows of "Positive Parenting". The program was

talking about trying to understand what goes on in a child's mind to understand the child's behaviour. None of us had asked what was going on in Ashley's mind! I decided I'd call.

In "Barbara Burrows Parenting" we learned to recognize clues given by the child; and to recognize our own "clues". My approach to school attendance once I tried to understand what was going on in Ashley's mind was unorthodox, to say the least. "BBP" didn't just encourage me to try and figure my daughter's feelings; it also encouraged me to look closely at my feelings, (I had not bargained for that!).

My husband and I decided to allow Ashley to have more control over whether or not she would go to school. We did not force her to attend against her wishes. She liked that plan, and although we were hoping, once given the choice, she would decide to go, we

were in for a surprise. One day, two days, the first week ... eight days, nine days, a second week gone. After two full weeks, Ashley was still at home.

Ask what the neighbourhood thought of my plan when Ashley simply stayed home because she wanted to! Not that I spoke openly about this unusual approach, but word got out when the other kids wondered why Ashley was not at school. My neighbour was coping with her daughter's similar behaviour. She was doing everything in her power to get the child to school. Her little girl got rewards, stickers on her hands, or verbal praise when she went without a fuss, and she did GO TO SCHOOL. "Her daughter goes to school! My daughter

**"Am I over-protective?"  
I asked myself.**

**"Is this professional  
giving me  
good advice?"**

stays home. Can I really be on the right track?" I worried.

Ashley decided to return to school, without anyone making her go, after two full weeks at home. There were no tears this time; she was somehow ready to surmount whatever fears she had struggled with at school. Thank goodness she finally returned, because we certainly weren't sure we were using the right approach.

Our main crisis over, I continued to come to understand as much as I could about my angry feelings towards Ashley. I began to recognize how easily I could become infuriated with her, with very little provocation — around many issues, not just school attendance. Could I be creating an anxiety within her, a need to stay with me? In class, we considered many possibilities. We never actually pinned down an easy to explain, an "ah there now I see" type of answer. Things just started to improve as I gained more insight into my own and her feelings.

Ashley's response to school during these past few years has convinced me I was on the right track. Although her attendance has been far from perfect, she eventually came to enjoy school. Her academic performance has been good. She loves her friends, has very nice relationships with her teachers. No child could have been more excited about starting school this fall.

At lunchtime, on that first day of school in grade four, we went to McDonalds. Sitting across from us was our neighbour and her daughter — the little girl who got stickers on her hands for going to school in Grade

One. As we chatted about school, the mother told me things are not going well for her daughter. She will soon be tested for learning disabilities. I felt sorry, and sad for the mother and her daughter.

So many children seemed to be getting tested these days for learning difficulties. I began to wonder if some of these learning problems could stem from psychological difficulties. I could not help but think of the number of times I had heard Barbara Burrows explain that one way children have of

acting out their (unconscious) anger when they feel too pressured is by refusing to learn. She says it can be the child's way of having some control over his life, even though the child is completely unaware of the tactic. The cliché "You can lead a horse

to water, but you can't make him drink!" comes to mind. She also explained that none of us can think when we are anxious or upset, so children who are unsettled cannot learn either.

Trying to understand our daughter's reasons and not forcing her eventually gave us pleasing results. Only by seeing her enthusiasm for school now can we feel confident that our unusual approach was indeed successful.

It seems odd that we never did find a specific reason for her refusal to attend school, yet the problem resolved itself. I can only think our attitude and efforts to recognize our daughter's needs must have played a role in encouraging her to eventually get the courage she needed to go to school. **BBPM**

**Ashley decided to return to school, without anyone making her go.**

# Another fight on the street!

**MY FOUR-YEAR-OLD** son has an ongoing love-hate relationship with a six-year-old tormentor in our neighbourhood. Inevitably, the two children begin to play together and within a short period have a loud quarrel that usually ends up with them shoving each other or fighting. I am continuously refereeing this situation — and never feeling I am doing the refereeing very well. I often lay blame on my son and end up dragging a screaming child into the house.



Yesterday, the same situation occurred. For some reason I paused before launching into my usual routine of refereeing. The two boys were playing on the front lawn and I overheard the disagreement. I could see our neighbour was provoking my son and my son was responding to his provocation by irritating the neighbour in return. Quite spontaneously, and with little thought, I asked my child to come in. To my surprise, he complied. Both his and my anger were racing. I did not have a clue what I should do next. I told him to sit on the stairs and I paced into the kitchen, trying to think of what to do. Here was my child, visibly angry, with tense posture, gritting his teeth and clenching his fists on the bottom step of the stairs. After thirty seconds of vainly trying to remember what we had discussed at Barbara

Burrows Parenting classes, I calmed down and approached Chris in the way that seemed right for me. The conversation went something like this.

“Chris, I see that you are very angry. Your face looks like you would like to hit Robert. But you didn’t. You controlled yourself and came inside when I asked you to.”

“I feel like killing him. He makes me so mad. He was mean to me and I’d like to break his head.” Chris muttered.

Somehow, I understood my son’s anger. I’d never really stopped to consider how he felt in these brawls before, but this time I understood what he meant.

“I know honey. Sometimes Mommy feels mad. I sometimes feel like hitting and punching someone, too. But I really appreciated you coming inside without screaming and yelling at Robert or

at me. You have good reason to be upset with Robert.”

We continued to talk. Less tense and much calmer, Chris added, “You feel mad sometimes, too?” I could not help but notice, as we talked, that my son had gone from extreme tenseness to a more relaxed posture of sprawling on the stairs.

“Yes, I do sometimes. But Mommy tries to work out the problem like you just did with me. I am really proud of you. How do you feel now?”

“Much better. I don’t feel like hitting Robert now. May I have a popsicle? And one for Robert?”

And off he went, happily, to play with Robert. I still felt resentful towards Robert but I gave each boy a popsicle anyway. I tried not to let my feelings interfere in the “making up” that was about to occur.

My normal response in these situations has been to lay blame and try to diffuse my son’s anger. My attempt to diminish his anger is almost always unsuccessful. He stays very angry and resentful. This time I tried to understand, acknowledge and accept his feelings — with no attempt to try to make him less angry. It worked in a way I never dreamed it would! Instead of the usual angry child who still wished to hurt (which is what I had experienced when I tried to diffuse his anger by blaming him and pointing out the error in his ways), this time I had a child who truly gained control of his hateful feelings. His aggression really was diffused. It felt to me that we had both learned something very important from this experience. I know I felt far more successful than I do out there trying to referee! **BBPM**

# Parent Education *with* Barbara Burrows



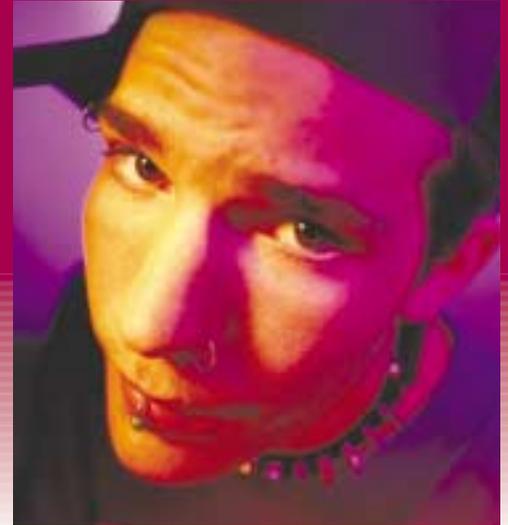
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