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ADDITIONAL HELP FOR TODAY'S PARENTS

Liberated Parents Liberated Children

YOUR GUIDE TO A HAPPIER FAMILY

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Will Listen & Listen So Kids Will Talk*

"Not only bridges the gap between theory and practice,
but also between generations" *Los Angeles Times*

WHEN PARENTS RESPECT THEIR CHILDREN'S FEELINGS, THE CHILDREN IN TURN LEARN TO RESPECT AND TRUST THEIR OWN FEELINGS

This somewhat obvious observation was not always so obvious to me. It took a series of personal experiences for me to begin to understand how important it was to teach a child to trust his own perceptions.

The first incident took place when Ted and I were picking up Jill's bicycle at the repair shop. She was seven then. As soon as she spotted her bike, she wheeled it outside. Meanwhile Ted walked around to the front to pay the cashier. A moment later Jill was back with a troubled look on her face. "The brake isn't right," she said.

The mechanic looked annoyed. "There's nothing

wrong with the brake. I worked on that bicycle myself."

Jill looked at me unhappily. "It doesn't feel right to me."

The mechanic was firm. "It's just a little stiff—that's all."

Jill said timidly, "No, it's not just stiff, it *feels* funny." Then she ran to tell her father.

It was an uncomfortable moment. The mechanic's look clearly indicated, "Lady, your kid is a pain in the neck. Don't tell me you're going to take her word over mine." I didn't know what to do. Here I had been trying to teach Jill that her inner voice was worth listening to, trying to teach her to say to herself, "If I'm feeling something, there may well be something to what I feel." On the other hand, here was a competent mechanic insisting that there was nothing wrong.

His scowl was too much for me. I mumbled something about how I was sure he was right, and that children do sometimes tend to exaggerate. At that moment Ted walked over and matter-of-factly said, "My daughter feels there's something wrong with the brake."

Sullenly, without a word, the mechanic lifted the bicycle onto a stand, examined the wheel, and said, "You'll have to leave it here. It needs a new section for the hub. The brakes are gone."

I was so affected by what had almost happened, that I vowed to myself "Never again!"

A few weeks later Jill and I were waiting for the light on a busy intersection. I took her by the hand and started to cross the street, but she pulled me back. I was about to let her know how annoyed I was, when I remembered. I said, "Jill, I'm glad to see you trust your own sense of timing, your own feeling

of what's safe for you. We'll cross when it feels right to you and that will take as long as it has to take."

As we stood there shivering for five minutes while I saw ten opportunities to cross, I said to myself that anyone watching me would think I was crazy. Maybe I was overdoing this business of teaching her to respect her feelings.

Then an incident occurred which permanently changed my thinking. It was a hot summer afternoon. Jill came bursting into the house, her bathing suit still wet, a strange look on her face.

"We were having such a great time in the pool with this nice teen-age boy we met," she said. "He played water-tag with us. Then later he took Linda and me off to the side where the trees are. He asked me if he could lick my toes. He said it would be fun."

I hardly breathed. "And then what?" I said.

"I didn't know what to do. Linda thought it was funny, but I didn't want him to. It made me feel . . . I don't know."

I said, "You mean there was something about the whole thing that didn't seem right to you even though you didn't know what it was?"

"Yes," she nodded, "so I ran home."

I tried not to let her see my great relief. As casually as I could, I said, "You trusted your feelings, and they told you just what to do, didn't they?"

And then the enormity of it hit me. Could a child's trust in himself, in his own perceptions, help to keep him safe? And if we deny a child his perceptions, do we dull his ability to sense danger, and make him vulnerable to the influence of those who do not have his welfare at heart?

The outside world works hard to make a child deaf to his own warning bell:

"So what if there's no lifeguard. You know how to swim."

"There's no reason to be afraid. Even if a car comes, you have plenty of time to steer your sled out of the way."

"Don't be chicken. All the kids are trying it. It's not habit-forming."

Is it possible that sometimes a child's very survival will depend upon his trust in his own small inner voice?

A year ago, if someone had asked me about the significance of validating children's feelings, I would have answered feebly, "Well, I suppose it makes for less friction, and it certainly doesn't do any harm."

Now let the questioner beware: he will get a more passionate reply. For now I am strongly aware that when we tell a child that he doesn't feel what he is feeling, we strip him of his natural protection. Not only that. We confuse him, disorient him, desensitize him. We force him to construct a false world of words and defense mechanisms that have nothing to do with his inner reality. We separate him from who he is. And when we do not permit him to know what he feels, I suspect that he becomes less able to feel for others.

But oh, when we acknowledge the reality of a child's feelings, what splendid gifts do we bring: the strength to act upon his inner promptings . . . the possibility of a caring heart . . . the opportunity to be in touch with a unique human being—himself.