



Helping Children with Emotions

The Train Analogy



MIRACLE
FOUNDATION

Five year old Dhruv was climbing into bed, his face turned away from me and toward the wall when he asked the question.

“Where’s Haathi?”

Haathi is the blanket Dhruv has been carrying around since he was old enough to hold tight.

As I thought about it, I hadn’t seen Haathi around all day, which was unusual.

Slowly, Dhruv turned to me, his mind racing. His mouth twisted and turned, his shoulders straightening and his back growing taller as the panic set in.

Finally the shout, **“I left Haathi in aunty’s bag!!!”**



Aunty, of course, was a state away by this point, which means we were facing Dhruv's first night since he was very small – the first night in **his** memory – without Haathi in his arms.

The initial shock was followed by currents of anger that flowed through Dhruv's body. He punched the air and gritted his teeth and screamed.

“I WILL NOT GO TO SLEEP WITHOUT HAATHI! I WILL NOT GO TO BED UNTIL HE IS HERE! I WILL NOT GO TO BED EVER AGAIN!”



The Train Analogy

That night, when I needed it most, I remembered the train analogy.

*Difficult feelings are like tunnels,
and we are trains traveling through them.*



We have to move all the way through the darkness to get to the calm, peaceful light at the end of the tunnel.



Where We Go Wrong

The problem is that we often attempt to interrupt our children on their journey through an emotional tunnel.

For example, watching Dhruv wrestle with his anger and fear, I could have easily said:

- *“It’s only one night. We can get him back tomorrow.”*
- *“We have so many other blankets, just sleep with another one tonight.”*
- *“You’ll be fine, I promise.”*

These statements would have been true,
but they would not have been helpful.



So often when our kids are struggling with a difficult feeling – sadness, anger, fear, embarrassment, loneliness, guilt – we try to “logic” them out of it.

We explain why they’re overreacting, or how WE know it will turn out just fine in the end.

We’re trying to help our children, of course, but when we peel back the layers a bit, I think we’ll find that what we’re really doing is trying to make OURSELVES feel better. Because our children’s pain hurts us deeply and makes us so uncomfortable.

We’re the ones who want their crying to stop as quickly as possible – not them.



Back to the Train Analogy

If emotions are tunnels and we are trains going through them, then we **NEED** to keep moving all the way to the other side.

What we as adults do when facing our own emotional struggles is attempt to get out of the tunnel early.

Sometimes we sit in the darkness, close our eyes, and just pretend we're not in a tunnel at all.

Everything is just fine, thank you.



Sometimes we do other things – eat unhealthy snack food, watch TV, waste time gossiping -- all to distract ourselves from the fact that we're in a tunnel.

But none of those things gets us out of the tunnel, does it?

Then, when we finally let ourselves stomp our feet, bang our fists, and have a good cry, we suddenly feel so much better.

The same is true for our kids. We can't teach them there's some secret exit when there's really not. There is no way out except through, and it's our job to guide them there.



That's why I didn't say a word to Dhruv. Instead, I just sat next to him as the ripples of anger melted in to shaking and sobbing. When I thought it was ok to do so, I started rubbing his back – still without speaking. He kept crying and crying.

The parent must come alongside the child's experience of frustration and provide comfort. The agenda should not be to teach a lesson but to move frustration to sadness. Much more important than our words is the child's sense that we are with him, not against him.

With that in mind, I was actually delighted that Dhruv was shaking with sobs because I knew it meant that he was traveling through his emotional tunnel rather than getting stuck in it.

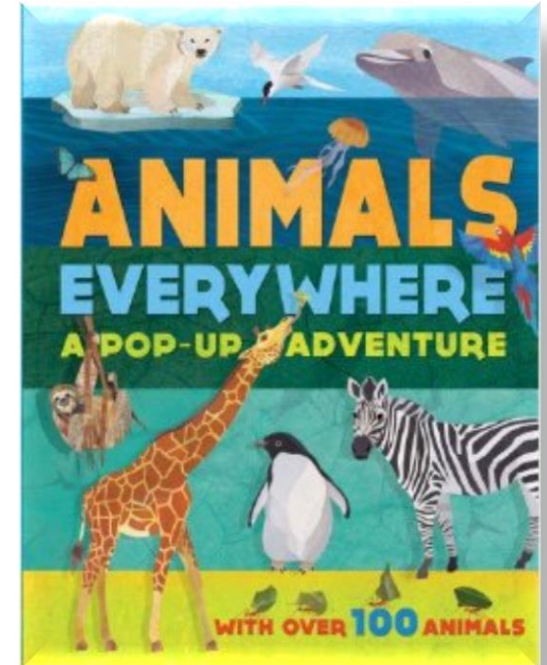


He cried and he cried and he cried.

Until he wasn't crying anymore.

Until, from his spot laying on the floor, he saw a book about animals, pulled it over, and started paging through it. As if nothing had happened at all.

I peeked at the clock. It had been 8 minutes.



Building Resilience

I decided speaking would be ok now, so I asked Dhruv if he wanted to make a plan. I told him I knew that bedtime tonight would be extra tough, but maybe we could think of some ideas together to help him through it.

(If I had suggested such a thing two minutes earlier, he would have EXPLODED. But because I waited until his train was through his tunnel it was fine.)

Without any additional help from me, Dhruv chose a different blanket to sleep with that night, then asked if we could read an extra book before bed to help make the evening more special.

Later, as I tucked him in and he turned to his side to fall asleep, he said peacefully, ***“I’m going to be ok tonight.”***



This is Where Resilience is Built

If I had called aunty and asked her to return the blanket, we wouldn't have built resilience.

If I had told Dhruv over and over again it was no big deal, it's just one night without Haathi, we wouldn't have built resilience either.

But simply by sitting by his side as he bumped his way through the tunnel? Allowing him to feel the rush and the panic, and then come up for air all on his own? ***THAT is building resilience.***



Remember your Job

So the next time your child is deeply frustrated, angry, or upset, remember what the job of a parent really is:

- ***Provide comfort through the frustrations***
- ***Draw out the child's cleansing tears***
- ***Show empathy to the child's struggle***
- ***Allow the life lesson to be learned naturally – not through preaching***
- ***Support the child's journey through the emotional tunnel***



The job of a parent is NOT to get the child to stop crying as quickly as possible.

Tears are a sign of caregiver success, not failure.

So, rub the child's back. Sit with them in silence. Stay alongside them as they chug, chug, chug through their tunnels of feelings. And be with them when they finally reach the calm, peaceful light at the end.



Thank you!

Adapted from “The Train Analogy that will Completely Change How you See your Crying Child”

<http://pickanytwo.net/the-train-analogy-that-will-change-how-you-see-your-crying-child/>

