

Tips for Parents by Susie Kohl

Decompressing at the End of the Day

PARENTS OFTEN ASK ME why their children greet them at the end of the day with a whine rather than a hug. In the adult's imagination, the child would run to her delightedly, extolling all the wonderful events of the day. In reality, children often slip into a more dour mood when their parent comes—a mood that begins with making demands or falling apart when their wishes are denied. Parents ask, "Why am I the dumping ground at the end of the day? I just want to hear how things went!"

A new study from researchers at the University of Wisconsin at Madison points the way to some of the answers. When children have been feeling tension in a situation—having an argument with a peer, trying hard on a math or spelling test—scientists found the best stress reducer of all is seeing Mom or talking to her in person. (Of course, children also feel stress relief when they see Dad.) What parents often encounter at the end of the day is a child simply decompressing from being in an environment all day that calls on him to stretch himself socially, emotionally, and intellectually.

One of the most common areas of end-of-the-day misunderstandings is question asking. Parents often blame themselves when their children shrug off questions or say, "I don't know." Magazine articles often address the "best ways to get your child to talk about school," as if eliciting responses from the child is a kind of science. An easier way to understand a child's temporary reluctance to review the day is reflecting on your own experience after work. How eager are you to answer questions about what happened during those eight hours? Both adults and children need to decompress.



Often our well-intended questions actually produce anxiety. "Did you have anyone to hang out with?" "Was anyone mean to you?" Today neuroscience provides us with images of what happens in the brain in different situations. I don't know about you, but having to dredge up situations from my day that might have filled my brain with the stress hormone cortisol puts me back into that state and blocks any positive feelings I might be having. On the other hand, the study from University of Wisconsin pointed out that being reunited with a loved one in person or even by phone washed the cortisol away.

In a courtroom, a question like "Was anyone mean to you?" would be termed "leading the witness" into a particular way of thinking. We want children to construct their own memories of a situation and to express their thoughts and feelings when it feels comfortable to them. One family established a dinner table ritual, having each person share the "best" and "worst" part of his day. Children are often willing to talk about the spelling test or the argument with a friend when they feel more relaxed and have established some emotional distance from the situation.

What children need from us at the beginning and end of each day is a nourishing hug. Younger children benefit from sitting on our laps. Studies show that we have the power with close physical contact to flood children's systems with oxytocin, also known as the "love hormone," which

creates a state of well-being they can carry with them. Instead of reacting with frustration when your child “lets down” with you at the end of the day, tell yourself, “It’s because I represent comfort,” and concentrate on creating a cocoon of loving decompression.

October 30, 2013

© 2013 The Meher Schools