

What to do with Frustration by Lisa Weiner (July 2nd, 2020)

If one were trying to create a recipe for frustration, these past few months would be the winning combination. Frustration is one of our primary mammalian emotions and **it arises when things are not going the way we want them to.**

Not being able to move about the world as we are used to doing? Frustrating! Having to do schoolwork all day at home? Frustrating! Not being able to see grandparents, teachers or cousins? Frustrating! Having to supervise schoolwork all day at home while trying simultaneously to work and/or do all the other things that need to get done? Also frustrating!

One of the foundational truths about emotion is that it seeks expression. If we understand this truth, we can make the time and space for expression. If we don't, our emotions will seek expression anyway and will leak (or explode) out of us without our consent. With the emotion of frustration, we all know what this eruption can look like: sharp words, tantrums (kid and adult versions), sarcasm, hitting (or impulses to hit), door slamming, self-harm and so on.

These days, *as frustrating circumstances abound*, we would be wise as parents to make sure that we build in regular times for emotion (both ours and our children's) to come out in ways that we are generally okay with; that we make time and space for what Dr. Gordon Neufeld calls "emotional playgrounds." Emotional playgrounds are activities or practices that provide unrushed time and ample space for emotions to move. They are, in essence, emotional "outhouses": designated places where discharges of emotion, which are sometimes unsavory and unappealing, can happen. The outhouse comparison is especially apt because we all know what type of mess awaits us when we don't make regular trips to the outhouse . . .

When we are thinking about the **expression of frustration** there are three broad categories of activities where it can "come out to play": **destructive** activities, **constructive** activities and **melancholy-inducing** activities.

It is probably obvious to all of us how destructive play "vents" frustration. Frustration can build up in our children (or ourselves) like a volcano that is ready to erupt; these types of activities provide places for the explosive energy to safely go.

Some examples of **destructive** activities are:

- Making a "This Sucks" box (like an old-fashioned complaint box) in the kitchen where family members can deposit paper slips filled with frustration whenever it needs to come out (if "sucks" isn't part of your approved vocabulary, remember that oftentimes the edgier the play is, the more aligned it is with getting foul frustration out safely)
- Slamming a punching bag
- Hammering glass bottles wrapped up in a towel
- Chopping wood
- Drawing a picture of someone or something and ripping it up
- Creating a "shit book" (a journal for rants and swear words and other generally unacceptable things)

Constructive play can also be a great way to move frustration. This makes sense if we remember that frustration comes when things aren't going the way we want. Frustration comes from wanting change, so being able to make something go just the way we want is a great release for the frustration that builds up around all the things that we can't change.

Some examples of constructive activities are:

- Making something just right, be it through woodworking, ceramics, baking or cooking
- Planting and tending to a vegetable garden
- Organizing a drawer, desk or bookshelf

Finally, and perhaps a bit confoundingly, activities that call forth a bit of sadness also help frustration to move. One of the greatest ways that frustration is released is through its conversion to sadness. In simplistic terms: can we get mad to turn to sad? This is the ultimate answer to all the things we can't change: to become changed ourselves by those very things, to adapt to things that are not going the way we wish they were. This is the root of true resilience, and this is why melancholy-inducing activities are so good at draining built-up frustration.

Some examples of melancholy-inducing activities are:

- Watching sad movies
- Reading poetry
- Making music or listening to music
- Reflective journaling

As you can imagine, each of these lists could go on and on—there are as many emotional playgrounds as there are people, and what works for someone may fall flat for someone else. It is important to find what works for each of your children, to find what works for you. As Dr. Neufeld says, all children have their “bent.” Are they a hitter? A yeller? A builder? A painter? We just need to figure out what that bent is.

During this time when so much is not going as we would like it to—this time of many daily frustrations—it should be integral to our newly reinvented schedules to have time for each member of the family to play. We all need places—at least a few times each week—where our frustration can move. We are often so afraid that if we give frustration an inch it will take a mile.

In truth, just the opposite is true. If we give our frustration some open space to flow, it will be much less likely to burst out of us when we are least expecting it.

Dr. Gordon Neufeld, 2017
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