Helping Parents When Parenting Gets Hard
by LuAnn Cooley

Patty Wipfli is the founder and Program Director of Hand in Hand Parenting, a non-profit, parent-led organization that helps parents when parenting gets hard. Her work focuses on building parents’ emotional understanding and on helping parents to establish networks of mutual support that benefit their families and communities. For more than 45 years, she has been teaching basic listening, parenting, and leadership skills to parents. Patty developed Parenting by Connection, a simple but powerful parenting approach that nurtures the parent-child connection. Her instructor team works in the United States and 17 countries serving parents with transformative tools and accessible support.

With co-author Tosha Schore, M.A., Patty wrote Listen: Five Simple Tools to Meet Your Everyday Parenting Challenges. Her Listening to Children booklets have sold over 800,000 copies and are available in 10 languages.

Patty’s focus on children began at an early age. When Patty was four years old, her seven-month-old sister developed a mysterious condition in which she descended into having no functional mind and no visible recognition of anyone. A cascade of stress, difficulty, and harm tumbled through Patty’s family that exacted a high price from each of them for decades, hitting her mother and younger brother the hardest.

Patty had extensive experience caring for young siblings, as the oldest of six children, and she also helped care for cousins and neighbors. Married at 21 years old, she began her career as a kindergarten and first grade teacher. While doing social justice work with the United Farmworkers in the late 60’s and early 70’s, she had her own two children. She was doing great as a mom until the birth of her second son. Her older son was not happy about being a brother. To her surprise and dismay, she began being harsh and having impulses to hurt the older son who was 2 years old at the time.

Then at a weekend retreat in 1973, Patty found herself crying uncontrollably and pouring herself out to Jennie, a woman she barely knew – sobbing about her own father and neglected brother – and Jennie did not interrupt and did not give advice. That afternoon, Patty played with her children and felt patient and joyful. Her whole body felt lighter. The pleasure of parenting had returned. She had no angry episodes for weeks afterward. She knew that whatever Jennie had done, that was what she had needed.

Patty went to Jennie and asked her to explain her magic touch, and Jennie replied that she had been taught to listen – that when there is a listener, when someone offloads tension and hurt through laughter, crying, tantrums, or trembling, they can heal and think and function more clearly. Jennie told her that listeners can exchange listening time, grow to trust one another and through listening do deeply beneficial things for one another. She explained that it is a pleasure to listen to someone and assist them in making emotional sense of their lives.
“That marked the beginning of my 47 years of experiments with listening,” Patty said. Patty began by listening to an engineer whose wife had just walked out on him, leaving him with a six-month-old Down syndrome daughter to care for. This listening time exchange took place for an hour every week for the next twelve years. Patty’s family life warmed and lightened as a result. She then employed listening with her two-year old son when he became ill. This helped him allay his fear of the medicine he was prescribed to take three times a day.

From these early experiences Patty saw that the stress of parenting could be prevented. Listening was a key for the adult and the child. Listening was a way of giving love that was powerful and respectful. “And soon after I saw how Listening Partnerships could help me in an ongoing way as a mother,” Patty says, “I and some other moms and dads embarked on figuring out how to use the ideas of listening to and connecting with children to keep them from reaching adulthood with heavy burdens of childhood hurt that get in their way of having the lives they wanted.”

Patty believes it is a privilege to be allowed into the emotional trenches with parents, to listen to them, to lend them confidence in themselves and their children, and to love. She confesses that she has made a lot of mistakes as a parent and that everyone has had hard things happen. She does this work with parents, aware that she has ideas that work very well, but that every parent needs good support to be there for their children, especially when times are tough.

Patty has led over 400 residential weekend workshops for families and for leaders of parents in the U.S. and in 23 countries. She authored the Building Emotional Understanding and Understanding Tears and Tantrums courses, which have transformed the lives of many thousands of parents and children in the U.S. and abroad. Her materials are currently published in English, Spanish, Chinese, and Japanese; several other languages will be added soon. She is also the author of the Parent Rescue Series: self-guided, self-paced online classes, focused on specific parenting topics.

Through Hand in Hand, Patty offers monthly free teleseminars in conjunction with leading parent educators, writers, activists, and bloggers. Her articles have been published in Mothering Magazine, the Bulletin of Zero to Three, and Child Welfare News.

Patty has two sons and three teenaged grandchildren, and lives in Palo Alto with her husband.

Four Questions for Patty

What Makes You Come Alive?

I love the act of listening to parents, one-on-one or in a group. Parents have so much love they want to give to their children and families, they work so hard at it, they summon unprecedented amounts of energy and persistence to love well. I love listening over time, and being privy to the creativity of parents, and to their successes in transforming difficult situations in their families into progress for their children and for themselves. I learn so much about what is humanly possible when you have flexible tools and some steady support! And besides that, I absolutely love being witness to my sons. They do so much better than I was able to do,
An Act of Kindness You’ll Never Forget?

When I was 11 or 12, our family went to a county fair and rodeo in my mother’s home town. There was a young man there in jeans and boots, 20 years old, I would guess, who had entered a pick-up game of baseball with about 7 or 8 younger boys, none of whom seemed to know each other or him. I stopped to watch. He was kind, encouraging, and knew how to set gentle limits when a boy began to argue, criticize, or stomp off in a huff because of what someone else had done or said. He was unfailingly kind, and managed to keep the game going through one challenge after another. I had never seen a grownup handle kids’ upsets with respect, and I felt like I had found the person I most trusted in the whole world that day, though I had no idea who he was or how he came to be so kind. I still treasure his memory--how he treated children made him a hero in my heart.

One Thing On Your Bucket List?

I want Hand in Hand Parenting to continue to grow and thrive, so millions of parents can learn to build effective support systems for themselves and their children.

One-line Message for the World?

Listening connects us and heals the hurt we carry--we can make a world of difference for one another by listening.

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For more inspiration, join this Saturday’s Awakin Call with Patty Wipfler. RSVP here.