

# The Protective Urges of Caregivers of Infants and Toddlers: Dealing with Feelings

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Just seeing a baby brings out feelings of tenderness and the desire to shield the infant from harm. We find this primitive protective urge in the adults of most species. When caregivers suspect that a family is not treating one of “their” children in this warm and protective way, they often experience an explosion of emotions. Rage, fear, frustration, and sadness are just a few of the ways they respond. Nothing seems to make a caregiver angrier than the notion that a parent is not treating a young child well.

Unfortunately, what most caregivers do when they feel these feelings is either deny them or feel so overwhelmed by them that they believe that they must act on them at once. However, society has put the caregiver of young children in a tight box. The accepted role model is a combination of Mary Poppins and Mother Theresa. There is no room for these feelings and no established way to deal with them—this dilemma is a weakness in our field that must be addressed. These feelings are normal, and that, to do effective work with infants and toddlers, they need the opportunity to acknowledge these feelings and deal with them.

At PITC, we have developed a process for helping caregivers deal with feelings of this sort. It is a version of the old advice: “Count to 10 before you act.” I hope you will find it useful. The process has four steps:

- Step 1: Explore Your Feelings
- Step 2: Check Out Your Feelings with Others
- Step 3: Seek the Parent’s Point of View
- Step 4: Develop an Action Plan

## Step 1: Explore Your Feelings

The first step, though it sounds easy, often is the most difficult. When I talk with caregivers having trouble with parents, I find that they often have difficulty focusing on their feelings. When I ask them to do so, a typical response is to talk about what the parent is doing that bothers them instead of talking about their own feelings—about **how** they are bothered. A common response to the question, “How does this make you feel?” often is an action statement like, “That I should tell the mother that she needs to

wash her own child!” The key to this step is understanding why it is important. Until you know what you’re feeling, you can’t know how it is affecting your actions. One goal should be to stay with your emotions and watch them. Often you will find that you have many feelings about the situation rather than just the first one you uncovered. The key is to focus on your own deep feelings rather than on the behaviors of others. Once you find out what they are, try to accept them.

## Step 2: Check Out Your Feelings with Others

Talk about your feelings with colleagues, your program manager, or even a spouse to get more clarity about them. Sharing with colleagues will almost always help you clarify your feelings and give you other perspectives on the situation. Colleagues might help you see that you always seem to get disturbed about this issue more than other issues or help you accept your feelings. Sometimes just thinking about feelings with friends or colleagues allows you to see anger turn to fear or sadness or depression turn to hurt. This step can be brief, but it is important because you may gain some valuable perspective.

## Step 3: Seek the Parent’s Point of View

Before you start to work on a problem with a parent, make sure you are certain about what the problem is. This step is one last information-gathering attempt before you confront the parent with your issues. During drop-off, pick-up, or general conversation, collect more information about the parent and the parent’s actions. Spend most of your time listening. Avoid being critical, arguing, disagreeing, or trying to solve the problem. You might find that what the parent tells you is quite different from what you imagined was happening or you might confirm what you already thought. At least you will have a more complete picture.

## Step 4: Develop an Action Plan

After you have gone through an exploration of your feelings, checked them out with others, and gone back to the parent to gain more clarity about things, it is time to put your action plan together. Our suggestion for the planning process is to divide it into three topic areas: addressing your own issues, interacting with the parent, and finding outside help. The first area involves what you will do for and about yourself.

## 4.1 Addressing Your Own Issues

- **Get support.** If, in examining an issue, you uncover fears, resentments, and biases in yourself that you need to work on, plan to seek out support through, for example, someone to talk with or counseling.
- **Handle your stress.** If you are experiencing stress, set aside time for yourself. Find an activity that will help you relax, such as walking, taking baths, or stretching.
- **Set boundaries.** If you feel you are doing too much to meet families' needs or you find yourself worrying about a child all the time, set limits on what you will do. Reflect on what you can realistically do as a caregiver and work on accepting the idea that you can't do everything.

## 4.2 Interacting with the Parent

Before you meet with the parent about the problem, it is a good idea to plan how you will relate, what issues you will address, and how you will address them.

- **Reflect on the relationship.** How will you be received by the parent? Is there already tension between the two of you? Assess your relationship for signs of how to approach things. Do you need someone else to intercede because things are already strained?
- **Decide on the content.** What do you know about the parent's sensitivities that can help you avoid bringing up provocative issues? How many issues will you bring up? What issues can you comment positively on and what issues central to your concern must be addressed?
- **Plan the interaction.** How will you approach the subject? What kind of an icebreaker will you use? Where and when will this conversation happen? What do you think possible next steps might be?

## 4.3 Finding Outside Help

You may find that the problem is too big for the parent and you to work on alone. All caregivers should know that they do not have to solve every problem on their own. Here are some supports to consider.

- **Contact a resource and referral agency.** Could a local child care resource and referral agency help you or the parent address the problem? Would the agency know about services you might not?
- **Seek programmatic help.** Is a child care mental health professional available to your program for consultation? Is your child care program part of a larger agency that has staff with special skills? Could you tap their skills?
- **Identify specific services.** Should your plan include referring the parent to services in the community that you already know about, for example, family support services, drug and alcohol counseling, food banks, or health clinics?

Finally, you should come to grips with the fact that this plan is just a beginning. It will change as the situation changes. By following this four-step plan when you start to have strong feelings about the parents you serve, you will likely help yourself and them. Remember the four steps when strong emotions come up.

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