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A Manner of Speaking by Bonnie Neugebauer

"Don't worry about a thing, every little thing gonna be all right." I was just listening to Bob Marley and thinking about children. Sorry, Bob, but children do worry. They worry about a lot of things. They also get confused and frustrated. Their feelings are powerful and often lead to behaviors that are challenging, both for them and for the adults who care for them. We are fortunate when they let us see what they are thinking, so that we have the opportunity to make them feel safe by exploring their worries and frustrations with them. Our responses have a profound effect on their ability to understand and cope with their own feelings.

It occurs to me how much every response — word, gesture, intonation, silence — matters as children are encountering new experiences, new feelings. We talk about raising moral children, about self-esteem and mental health, how to teach children. But I think the real learning happens in the moments more powerfully than in the lessons. Moments are emotional, the feelings are powerful and real, lessons happen more often in the abstract.

Oliver (age 5) loves baseball. For many months he has been enjoying watching sports with his family, in ballparks and on television. And now he gets to play baseball, to hit and catch and run. At practice the other afternoon, he hit the ball three times. He beamed as he ran from the field. But later, when he was tired from a full day and his thoughts and emotions swirled, he grew upset, and then very upset. "I shouldn't have been called out. . . . I only got to hit three times and the last time I didn't get to run. . . ." His feelings escalated as he dealt with his intense desire to be great at baseball and his equally powerful feelings about justice and fair play. Fact and perception played hard against each other, and all of it was real and true for him.



His parents responded with calm and generosity. They made Oliver feel safe to express his feelings physically by creating boundaries for his behaviors. They created space for his words to come out. They loved him, and when he was ready, they held him close. As time softened the intensity, Oliver's parents asked questions and shared ideas and thoughts. Together they arrived at a calmer place where feelings and behaviors could be discussed. Oliver still owned his thoughts, but now they were out in the open.

Oliver is lucky to live in a family where there is a lot of talk and where it is safe to have feelings. Of course, the pathway to learning how to express those feelings creates some challenging moments, but that's life. Oliver's fortune is having loving adults to help him navigate the aftermath of experiences and forge ahead.

Photograph by Erik Bilstad