

Telling It Like It Is
A story about parenting
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One afternoon I was taking care of some small children while their moms attended a brief retreat. I had brought along a number of Montessori ideas for activities and there was lots of pouring, spooning and sponging going on.

Unannounced, one of the mothers dropped into the room to see how her son was getting on. She walked across to where he was working and showed interest as he squeezed the sponge full of water into an empty bowl. He was happily engaged and had been for some time but his mother's advent broke his concentration as she asked him about what he was doing and praised his skill. Her presence led him to believe that she had come to take him home but as this was not the case, she urged him to continue his work. However, by that time he was done and only wanted to leave with her.

Mom, of course, was not ready to leave. The retreat was only half over. When he clung to her at the door, she urged him to stay, to go and play some more, to join a group nearby or to seek out his big sister, but nothing would induce him to stay any longer. Finally she 'promised' "I'll just go and say good-bye to my friends and then I will be right back to get you." Closing the door in his face she left him, where he stood sentinel for the rest of the afternoon, waiting for his mom who was coming "right back". She did not return shortly, but only did so 90 minutes later when her program was over.

This episode disturbed me in two ways. Firstly by entering the room and engaging her son in conversation the mother came between her son and his work. She interrupted his concentration and his engagement. It seemed to me that she could easily have observed from the door and seen that he was busy and happy. To me there was no reason for her to come clear across the room except to make sure that he noticed her.

Secondly, in order to return to her workshop she did not tell him the truth when she said she'd be right back. In order to return to her program she again did not meet her child's needs. By interrupting his work, she created his need to be with her, but she did not accept responsibility for that and instead abandoned her son.

In all probability, this parent was trying to show her interest and concern for her child's comfort by admiring his work and reassuring him that she would be back to get him, but the good intentions in both instances resulted not in her child's comfort but rather in his distress. He was unable to engage in any other activities or to participate in the games we played to wile away the afternoon. He stood uncomfortably by the door, sulking, sometimes crying and clearly upset.

It is possible that this mother felt that she was good and caring by coming to see what her son was doing. If so, her behavior could have met her need to fulfil her image of herself as a good mother. However, on the other side of the situation, she had failed to respect her child's needs

both with regard to interrupting his work and by telling him she'd be right back, when that meant in one and a half hours time. Instead of comfort she brought her child distress.

Children do need to know that they are not abandoned but sometimes they are quite all right on their own too! A balance is struck when we are genuine with children, for actions speak louder than words when it comes to building trust and security.

Omaha, NE
November, 2005