My five-year-old son bent down and picked up a wooden building block. He looked up, caught my eyes, and then deliberately hurled the block at me. It whacked my leg with full force leaving me stinging in pain. Ouch!

Well-meaning plans for setting limits that involve deep breathing before reacting seem to fly out the window at moments like this. At best we might fruitlessly try to reason with our revved up child, “I can see you’re angry but it’s not okay to throw blocks, it hurts other people;” or maybe we find ourselves shouting threats, “Don’t you dare! If you throw that block you’ll have to…….”, offering a consequence or time out. Events can quickly turn ugly.

Things we swore we’d never do seem to happen: maybe we drag our child screaming to their room so they can learn a lesson, or worse. Later, we feel guilty and confused. How did things get so out of hand? Why did our darling child throw that block in the first place? And what on earth are we meant to do, anyway? It can feel like something is terribly wrong with us, and our child.

In truth, however, almost all children at one time or another lash out at others – whether it be hitting, biting, kicking, scratching or hurling blocks. It’s tempting to think that we need to teach them that such behavior is not acceptable. But really, even very young children are quick learners. Children have excellent memories. My son certainly knew that throwing blocks with the intention of hurting me was not okay. So why did he do it?
“Emotions drive a lot of behavior,” Dr Vicky Flory, a Lecturer in Psychology reminds us. “We don’t see children’s emotions directly, but rather through their behavior and facial expressions.” If we watch closely we can notice that aggressive outbursts, like my son’s, are driven by fears that lie deep inside.

From early in life children experience many, many things that are deeply frightening to them. Major stresses such as a difficult birth and necessary medical treatments leave obvious emotional scars. But other more minor events that might seem inconsequential to the adults around also frighten a baby. A sudden loud noise, waking alone in a room, or an overly enthusiastic cuddle from an older sibling might be scary for an infant. However attentive and attuned a caregiver is, all children get frightened.

Until they are able to heal from the hurts, these fears stay lodged inside a child’s emotional memory called ‘implicit memory’. Dr Dan Siegel, a Professor of Psychiatry, says that, “implicit memory relies on brain structures that are intact at birth and remain available to us throughout life.” These memories can get re-stimulated by things that remind us of the original fright. Dr. Siegel explains that if a child becomes frightened “by a loud noise associated with a particular toy…they will get upset when shown that that toy in the future.” But they won’t have a conscious memory of why they are frightened by the toy. Fears experienced early in life, even in the womb, remain with a child and are triggered again by events and situations that are reminiscent of the original fright.

So for my son there was something in that moment which ignited a deep old fear lodged in his implicit memory. He couldn’t ask for help because he’d lost his sense of closeness to me. Instead, the tight knot of bad feelings stuck inside made him lash out. I don’t know why my son felt scared in that moment and in a way, it didn’t matter. I did know that it was my job to reach in, help him feel my love, and help him offload the upset that was stopping him from thinking.

**fear stops thinking**

When we feel deeply frightened we can no longer think. We can no longer access our prefrontal cortex, the seat of reasoning and judgment in our brain. Bruce Perry, a child trauma expert, explains that when we are in a state of fear, brain scans show that there is virtually no activity in our thinking brain. So we respond with the basic mammalian response to feeling threatened: fight, flight or freeze. My son was going for fight. When driven by a fight response, children will scratch, hit or kick as well as throw things! So my son, now feeling deep primal fear and completely unable to access his thinking brain, responded by lashing out at me.

At this point it is obvious that trying to reason with a child, “Hey, it’s not okay to throw blocks,” is futile. Children cannot think in this state. Encouraging a child to use words and name their feelings may, if we are lucky, take a child into their thinking brain and away from their primal response, but it does nothing to heal the fears lodged inside. The hurt will bubble up again at another moment with some other unworkable behavior. Of course shouting, punishing and doling out consequences focuses only on the behavior; these strategies pay no attention to the reasons why your child is stuck in a state of fear and they only add further hurts driving an ever deeper wedge of disconnection between parent and child. They may appear to work temporarily with younger children, but the problem behaviours come back, only next time more sneakily. So what can we do?
It never makes sense to let a child's aggression go unanswered. We need to target the real problem: we need to turn the child’s sense of disconnection around, and heal those fears stuck in our child’s implicit memory. Luckily, children instinctively know how to heal. If we stay close to a child and offer warm loving attention they will offload the feelings of hurt that are stuck inside.

They will laugh, cry, tremble or tantrum. If we can stay close as they do this we will see that as they work all the way through their messy feelings they will come out the other side much better. When they finish clearing out a big chunk of feelings they may snuggle close to us, fall into a deep sleep or even just get up brightly and carry on as if nothing happened. They will be able to think again.

In turn, as parents, we too have many emotional memories waiting to be healed. The moment our child aggressively lashes out at us, old hurts get triggered—we leave our thinking, rational brain and dive deep into our emotions. The impulse we have at the moment our child lashes out tends to reflect how we were treated as children. Part of our memory has carefully recorded how our parents treated us when they were stressed and upset. We repeat our own parents’ reactions without thinking. It doesn’t matter how committed we are to being a nurturing parent: if we were lectured, we feel like lecturing; if we were hit, we feel an urge to hit.

To find new ways of reacting we too have to heal our own hurts. We can do this by finding a good listener—we need someone to pay warm attention without judgment and without giving advice as we talk about our impulses and shed emotional tension. This helps clear away hurtful impulses and find new and more effective responses. Over time we will find we can use new ways of responding to our child when they lash out at us.

So back to the block moment. What happened next? Swallowing the initial fright that shot up, I moved in as warmly as I could. I said in a kind voice and with a cheeky glint in my eye, “Now that’s a funny way to ask for a raspberry on the belly”. I moved close towards my son to give him a “vigorous snuggle.”
Patty Wipfler, founder of the not-for-profit Hand in Hand Parenting, explains, “You’re doing what one might call a “limbic tackle.” You can’t get through to your child’s prefrontal cortex, because he can’t feel his connections with anyone at the moment. He can’t listen to reason. So you do things his limbic system—the social center of his mind—can understand.”

By making playful warm physical contact, “You stop the behaviour he’s caught in, but you do it with nonverbal, generous “I want to be close to you” gestures. These are the signals that his limbic system is starved for. These are the signals that let him laugh, or let him break into a big tantrum. These are the signals that, one way or another, will get his mind working again, aware that it’s safe to love and let others love him.”

To begin with I found it was pretty difficult to do this. But over time it’s become easier to respond with affection when my son lashes out. It helps enormously to find someone who can listen to us (out of earshot from our children) as we let loose about how cross we feel when our child hits the dog, scratches her brother, or throws blocks at us.

So after I’d spent some time rolling around on the floor giggling with my son and trying to plant raspberries on his belly, he began to soften. The laughter had helped heal some tension, and he was feeling connected to me again. He came close and sat on my lap, put his arms round my neck, looked into my eyes and said, “You’re made of nice.” And that was it: he played well for the rest of the afternoon. What a turnaround!

This ‘vigorous snuggle’ response works well for a child who hits, bites, scratches or throws things occasionally but for a child with a stronger tendency toward aggression, you need to embark on what Patty Wipfler
describes as an “emotional project.” Hand in Hand Parenting has an online self-guided course, Helping Your Child with Aggression to take you through such a project.

Download your free copy of Setting Limits with Children by Hand in Hand Parenting Founder, Patty Wipfler.

References: Dr Vicky Flory, Your Child’s Emotional Needs, 2005 p.6; Dr Dan Siegel, The Developing Mind, 1999 p.29; Bruce Perry M.D., PhD., Born For Love, 2010; Patty Wipfler.