

Can I Have a Hug? Helping Children with Hello and Goodbye

Q. My 5 year old is not big on hellos or goodbyes.

Most of the time, I have been okay with this, but there are times when it seems inappropriate. For example, last summer we visited my family on the East Coast. My daughter didn't connect with my dad too much despite having spent a lot of time in his house. When he took us to the airport, my dad tried to give my daughter a hug goodbye but she refused. Of course, I felt bad but didn't push her. But I did express to her that that didn't feel good to Grandpa and that he's her grandfather (implying that she "should" have given him a hug). How do you suggest handling these situations?

A. Great topic to think through with you! Here are my thoughts, and a few ways to use Listening Tools to loosen things up for your child and others. It's an issue that *every* self-respecting child has with ritual interactions with adults.

Don't force affection. Do facilitate connection.

First, we need to support our children to give affection when they feel like it, when it comes from the heart. If we force our children to give affection in ritual ways, or on demand, to adults who "deserve" it, there may be unintended consequences. If they *have* to be affectionate with adults when we want them to, will they be able to stick up for themselves under other circumstances? Will they feel strong enough to say "no" under the pressure to agree to someone's touch in order to please that person, or to "prove themselves" later in their lives? I think that compliance with adult wishes for affection is not what we want for our children. We want them to experience real relationships, with a heartfelt show of affection that's mutual and fulfilling. Affection rituals with people very close to them can be lovely for children: nuzzling before bedtime, 5 kisses and hugs before you leave for work—these can be useful and reassuring and reflect the love that you have for one another.

But children don't take easily to interactions that are ritual in nature, toward people they don't feel connected to. They are made for fresh, spontaneous interaction that they have invented just for this moment, just for the person they're saying "Hi" or "Bye" to. So my personal policy is that no child of mine (and no grandchild) is expected to give any particular kind of affection to relatives, guests, friends, or even to me as mom or grandma. I recommend this policy. It insures that you and others will receive real affection on your daughter's timetable. You can't control when her warmth shows, but when she does offer her warmth, it will be real and true.



Helping a child who avoids “Hello” and “Goodbye” rituals

At times, a child can feel isolated, and lose her ability to feel tender, to reach out, or to show caring. When children are upset, this is how they become (and so do we, come to think of it). And when a child has been forced to show affection, an “allergy” to hellos and goodbyes can develop. Our help is needed. It is possible to nudge a child toward a bit of contact, without being coercive. You can preserve your child’s integrity *and* warm up her sense of connection.

I think it's reasonable to set an expectation that our children acknowledge friends and relatives at hello or goodbye time. Exactly how they do that can be their choice, fresh each time, but they will need some assistance from us to figure out how they want to meet this expectation.

Instead of directing our children in their contact with others, which tends to have unsatisfying results, [Listening Tools](#) like Special Time and Playlistening give a parent a way to address and lift that little emotional hitch that lies beneath the surface. Once we accept that there's a hitch, it can be interesting and fun to set up ways to improve our children's ability to connect with expectant adults.

Playlistening at Hello or Goodbye time to improve the connection

Playlistening is a way of playing that gives the child the upper hand, and gives the parent a chance to help elicit laughter, one of the strongest paths to a genuine connection. When grandpa comes, you could set it up by saying, "Honey, Grandpa is here. How do you want to say hello?" Set your expectation, but don't imagine that your child will immediately be able to fulfill it. You know this is hard for her! If she runs away, you then say, lightly, "Oh, *that's* how you say hello! I see! You run away. Hmm, I wonder how Grandpa is going to say hello to *you*? Let's see if he can find you!" You then prompt Grandpa to give chase, but to blunder around before he finds her. He gives big generous air kisses when he finds her, or tries to blow a kiss, and sees that it falls on the ground! And blows another. Maybe this turns into an affectionate chase game, or loud complaints, "My kisses are all falling on the floor! Why don't they stick? Maybe this one will stick!" You try to be light enough, and goofy enough, so laughter arises. Along with it will come some good will toward Grandpa.

Or if she buries her head in your shoulder, then you say, "Hmmm, we have a buried girl here. Let's see if her foot can say hello," and you move her foot. She withdraws, of course, because she is showing you a place where she doesn't feel safe. But you continue, lightly, "Oops, Grandpa, no foot-hello today. Maybe she can do a trotting hello. Stay there, Grandpa, we're coming!" and you back away, then trot toward him with her in your arms, bounce, bounce, bounce, then bonk into his shoulder. You're hoping for laughter. If there's none, try that again, saying, "Hmmm, didn't work this time, but I bet it will work if we do it again. Get ready for your trotting hello, Grandpa! We're coming!"



Emotional release helps children be themselves.

You might get a good cry. You might get some laughter. You might, if she's really locked into withdrawal, have to move toward gently prying her away from you an inch or two, and letting her cry about not wanting to say hello. You have to explain this situation to Grandpa, of course. "Sorry she's feeling shy. Her feelings come up when she's with people she feels safe with, so this is actually a complement to you, Dad. When she's cried, she'll be able to connect better with you. She's getting some barriers out of the way."

It may be that you won't be able to use Listening Tools right then and there, because of judgments that will come down on you and on her from a Dad who can't understand children's upsets. In that case, let her sit there awhile, and say, "Grandpa, She's going to say hello to you in her own way. Let's be on the lookout for how she does it." Your daughter *will* find a way-- every child wants to connect. Find any excuse, and call it "Her hello."

Playlistening games that focus on connection and affection

Here are some games you can experiment with that can help children connect better with those they don't know well:

Hold-a-gaze hide and seek: While doing pillow fights, when you are down and have been "gotten" by a pillow, hide your face, and say, "Oooh, is she out there? I don't want to look!" then, slowly, peek out, saying, "Ohhh, I hope no one is looking at me! I don't want to see anyone's eyes!" Peek, squeal, and hide again. Often children who have a hard time connecting love this game. You've reversed the roles, and it's hilarious to them. They burn into you with their gaze, and you keep hiding, timidly coming out, and showing that you're still "afraid" to be caught by her gaze. Do what lets laughter roll, without tickling.

I'm going to give you 100 kisses: Take a big-hearted but slow and goofy stance. Hold your arms out, and say, "I have great big kisses for you. Here I come!" and then walk toward her, but walk straight into the wall instead, or run into the sofa and fall face down on it. She is yards away. You missed! Try again, but fail to hug her. Then, full of consternation, try backing towards her, thinking that your hugs might be able to find her if you go backwards. You get the idea. Put out lots of effort to hug, lots of goofy tries, while she gets to dance away and laugh at your silliness. Beg and plead for just one kiss, and as you lurch toward her, kiss the air with your eyes closed, or kiss a chair or the doorjamb. Then open your eyes and see that you've lost again! She's not there! Why did you kiss the doorjamb?! Whatever gets the most laughter is the thing to keep doing.

No huggie, no kissie: A version of the above, which can become a frequent game upon arrival and departure. You try to hug or kiss, and your child runs. You make as much eye contact as you can—*that's* the acknowledgment and the connection that matters. Everything else is frosting on that cake—it's not necessary, but you can playfully try for more. You spend 3 minutes trying hard for a hug or a kiss, and when you decide you're done, you say, "Great! I



got *no* hugs, *no* kisses. But someday, someday, *someday*, I'll get one! I'll just have to try again next time! You are so much faster than I am!"

In these games, you *do* need to make at least a bit of playful physical contact, sooner or later. If you don't, your child will feel, deep inside, like there's something wrong with her. The contact you make should be playful, physical, and very brief if your child tenses, screeches or freezes when you come close. Watch what promotes laughter, and keep at it. Some children need lots of physical wrestling to promote laughter and eye contact. Others need you to stay across the room most of the time for them to feel safe enough and in charge enough to laugh. You'll see what works. When the laughter turns to screeching or a frightened look, move back, and allow the child more power and more space in play.

These games help relieve children's paralysis when affection is expected of them, but not felt by them. And they can help undo big feelings about those adult expectations, which often look automatic, and therefore unappealing, to children. They'll help you set up interesting, fresh, never-before-experienced hellos and goodbyes, in which your child can play at connecting, and succeed, sooner or later, when laughter has bestowed its very special effect on the hearts of young and old.

Special Time is a great overall tool for facilitating a connection.

You also might consider introducing your father to the idea of Grandpa Time. It's a simple idea, but can really help awkward grandparents begin to build a relationship with their grandchildren on the grandchild's terms. You set up something interesting and unusual to do: four colors of play dough to knead; buttons to glue to art paper; making mud pies with lentils and spices in the back yard; or taking the dog for a walk with a kerchief or a helium balloon tied to his collar. It's not Special Time, *per se*, but it's something you set up to ease them into contact and connection. You can hover a bit, to add to your daughter's sense of safety. But fade into the background, so your father can be the featured adult.

Let us know what you try, and how it works out!

Patty