

The Skinned Knee Incident, Washington, D.C., 1972

One afternoon I was at the Lego table. I was 24 years old. I was almost ALWAYS at the Lego table, surrounded by three or four or five three- and four-year-olds. This was my fifth year “teaching” at a small community preschool in Washington, D.C. I heard someone wailing. Richard came in from the backyard play area. He was crying loudly and asking, “Where’s my mom!?” His mom was one of the three teachers at the small community preschool.

“She’s not here now, Richard. What’s happening?”

“I want my mom!!”, he was crying and almost yelling.

I could see that he was holding his knee and there was blood running down his shin. “Well, she’s not here – what happened?” I asked as I stooped down and moved closer.

“I fell down ...”, he managed to say while continuing to cry. “... On the sidewalk. It hu-u-rts!!” he cried.

“I can tell,” I said. “That’s good.”

I was surprised that I said that. Of course that didn’t help him get what he wanted, and he cried more loudly and adamantly, “I want my MOM!!!!”

I moved a little closer to him. “Richard, she’s not here now – she’ll be back in a little while” and without stopping added, “I meant that it’s GOOD for it to hurt since you fell on it on the cement and broke the skin.” He started to make eye contact with me but still crying and catching his breath. “Come here and let’s take care of it!” I said with as much eye contact as I could get. He came over to me. “Let’s take a look ...”.

“It’s BLEEDING!!!” he cried louder, after seeing the blood.

“Yes, it IS!” I said, and added emphatically, “And that’s good too!” He was looking at me, and still crying but I did have his attention. “Richard, your knee is working perfectly right now, and I can tell it really hurts. Hurting is how your knee makes sure that you take care of it right away – that’s why I said ‘Good!’ when you told me it really hurts!”

This was a new experience for the both of us. Perhaps he had never had someone treat him like he was fine and nothing was wrong, just that his body was asking for attention - that everything is not only okay, but going quite well despite of the pain, despite the blood, and despite that his mom was not around at the moment. And I had never tried speaking and acting like that ... I didn’t want to seem uncaring and cold. But I noticed that, in responding that way, my caring was very real in a new way. In those moments, I didn’t care how I appeared to anyone else, as I was focused on Richard.

Then I said, as Richard was crying and still looking for his mom, “Richard, bleeding is a way our body takes care of cleaning and protecting itself when part of it is broken, so that’s why I said ‘Good!’ then too. Your body is doing just what it should be doing – it is really working the way it’s supposed to, and so are you! Good job!” I waited a few seconds. “How much does it hurt now?” I asked. He looked at me quizzically. “I mean, is it THIS much,” moving my hands far apart, “or THIS much?” moving them closer together. We walked into the bathroom to wet a paper towel.

“It’s THIS much!” he said and moved his hands as far apart as he could while crying more intensely.

“Thank you for letting me know” I said. I asked him the same thing again a minute later.

“It’s this much!” moving his hands far apart. As he showed me, his crying lessened and his hands were moving closer together. Then his crying almost stopped. He was paying attention to his injured knee.

I got ready to put a cold, wet towel on it, which I told him I was going to do. He pulled back and started to wince before I touched the wound. I thought to myself, "That's interesting ..." as I recalled doing the same thing when I was expecting something to hurt.

"Well, we're going to help your body now by checking it and getting any dirt or sand or cement out of it, okay?"

"O-ka-ay," he said, sobbing a little.

After wiping it clean I said, "Let's take a look. Wow ... that looks pretty clean! How much does it hurt NOW?" I wanted him to look in each moment and just feel his injury, and he did. He began feeling pain without reacting as if there was something wrong. He stopped crying, and moved his hands closer together. I asked every twenty or thirty seconds. And every time I asked I emphasized "NOW", implying that it might have changed one way or the other. His hands moved closer and closer together, and in one or two minutes the pain disappeared. Then I let him know he really did a good job getting help, and I'm glad that he let someone else help him when his mom was not available. This whole thing only took a few minutes, and when his mom found out what happened she was amazed that he was over it so fast.

How many times have we ourselves seen a child fall or bump themselves, and start crying, and we ask with great concern, "What's wrong?" - if not in words, then in our facial expression? Certainly our immediate attention is important, as serious hurt is possible, but what are the messages our child is getting from the way we handle it? Do we want to be giving all of these messages? And are there other messages that we can impart in these situations that can help our children develop an empowering view of themselves, their bodies, their relationships, and the world? Indeed, the more we look for, the more we will find.