until impulse control around emotional content is present, and temper their strong reactions. Children cannot evolve and grow as emotional beings without adult relationships to shield and preserve their soft hearts.

Tears and Tantrums
Understanding Frustration and Aggression

Heaven knows we need never be ashamed of our tears,
for they are rain upon the blinding dust of earth, overlying our hard hearts. I was better after I had cried, than before—more sorry, more aware of my own ingratitude, more gentle.

CHARLES DICKENS

In the middle of a business meeting, Elise’s attention was hijacked by a frantic message from her mother-in-law, who was taking care of her three-and-a-half-year-old son, Nathan. In a controlled yet panic-laden voice, Grandma relayed how her grandson was “melting down” on the sidewalk with screams, cries, and refusals to move. When Elise asked what happened, Grandma replied, “I was trying to take him for a sushi lunch like you asked, but he has other plans— he is screaming he wants ‘ham-churges.’ I made the mistake of walking by a restaurant that serves them and now he won’t listen to me—can you talk to him please?” Elise replied, “All you need to do is say no and comfort him. It’s fine if he cries.” Her mother-in-law paused long enough for Elise to hear her son wail, “I want fries! I want ham-churges!” Grandma replied, “He is so loud, he is so upset. I just can’t say that. It just breaks my heart to hear him cry and to say no. I can give Nathan the phone so you can tell him no.”
As Elise listened to her son cry and to the desperation in Grandma's voice, she knew a sushi lunch was a futile endeavor. She couldn't fix the problem from afar, nor could she risk conveying to Nathan that her mother-in-law couldn't handle him. Elise responded with her best option: "Tell Nathan you've changed your mind and you really want to have hamburgers for lunch too. Tell him you are going to make a Grandma executive decision and take him there." As Elise heard Grandma gasp a sigh of relief, she hoped it would be enough to convince Nathan there was still someone in charge while getting him beyond the impasse.

The force of a young child's frustration can make an adult buckle and run for cover, but this will come at a cost to the adult's capacity to lead a child in accepting limits and restrictions. In the face of tears and tantrums, adults need to know when to change something for a child, know when to help them accept the things they cannot change, and have the wisdom to know the difference.

**Toddler Force and Preschooler Hurricanes**

Young children are ferocious and tenacious change agents who strive to get what they want at all costs. Their requests are fuelled by emotion but are disconnected from the constraints of reality. If one cookie was yummy, then a whole bag must be "yummier." Their desires and wishes are untempered by the knowledge that they can't always get what they want, nor do they know what is good for them. They can argue like lawyers, negotiate like salespeople, and demonstrate why whining is the most annoying sound to the human ear, worse than the screech of a high-pitched table saw? This isn't a cruel joke played on parents but a well-designed developmental feature that allows adults to help children adapt to the world they live in. Children are not born with preprogrammed knowledge about limits and restrictions, and for good reason: to allow for flexibility, versatility, and malleability in adapting to their environment. The challenge is, adults must be the ones to present the futilities of life to a child and ride through frustration until they accept those futilities. Failure to do this can foster alpha problems and a lack of resilience when faced with adversity.

Young children can erupt with frustration in their own unique style, including screaming, yelling, kicking, biting, head banging, scratching, pinching, vomiting, or a combination. As one father said, "As soon as my two-year-old son doesn't get what he wants—a chocolate, the chair his sister has, a toy, random items around the house like the dog's tail—he hits, bites, and throws whatever is at hand. He also screams very loudly. There are tears, but these are very angry tears." Ironically, it seems that a child's particular bent for expressing foul frustration can coincide with what is most egregious to their caretaker. Vomit-phobic parents seem to get the pukers, and sound-sensitive parents get the screamers. A mother who adopted a child at birth asked me, "We don't scream or yell in our house. My husband and I are the most peaceful parents, but my daughter has started to throw herself on the ground and scream at the top of her lungs. I am worried—is something wrong with her mental health?" Although I reassured her that tantrums were common in young children, she asked, "But what am I supposed to do when she is like this?"

Parents will attest that early childhood is a violent time because of their young child's lack of impulse control and strong emotions. As Gordon Neufeld states, "it's lucky for us they have small bodies and poor aim." Their frustration can erupt in a second, bringing with it unanticipated challenges and uncivilized behaviour. It can unsettle a parent to see their child lash out, as one mother revealed in a phone message to me: "When my three-year-old punched me in the head today, screaming and kicking as I pulled her out of a store because I said no to buying her something, I realized I need to get some better strategies for dealing with her!" The good news is, a child's untempered reactions should start to dissipate with ideal development, around the time the 5-to-7 shift occurs. Physical forms
of aggression should transform into verbal forms, and the child will start to shudder and shake but erupt in aggression less frequently. As one five-year-old said after feeling bad for screaming, "I tried to hold it in, but my neck and mouth couldn’t take it any longer."

It is the mixing of feelings and thoughts that comes with the 5-to-7 shift that delivers a natural resolution to children’s untempered frustration. When a child feels both frustrated with someone and also alarmed at the thought of hurting that person, the conflict between these feelings will temper their reaction. When they can feel both the impulse to attack someone and their caring not to hurt someone, they will demonstrate better self-control. The mixing of feelings and thoughts holds their eruptions at a standstill and allows words to become the answer to expressing frustration. With guidance from adults, their words will also transform into more civilized forms of expression—"Poo poo face I hate you, Daddy" will morph into "I’m frustrated. I don’t like your answer."

Frustration is often seen as a problematic emotion because it is associated with attacking energy and acts of aggression. However, frustration is not something we need to unlearn: it is an important emotion that is hardwired into humans for good reason. It is a powerful force that has a job to do—frustration is the emotion of change. It is meant to pack a powerful punch, and it isn’t something we can run from or extinguish. Frustration is what mobilizes us to work hard at getting what we want or to change the things that don’t work for us. We will serve our children well if we can help them harness its power and bring it under a system of intention and decision making by the time they are young adults. They will be able to drive forward and effect change in a way that is civilized and responsible. They will be able to hold themselves and others accountable for what doesn’t work and needs to change. We need to help a child understand this powerful reservoir of emotional energy inside of them. Frustration underlies our capacity to change the world around us and ourselves as we mature.

How Do We Help Children with Their Frustration?

FRUSTRATION IS A strong emotion that fuels a young child to change what doesn’t work for them. However, they need to be equipped to live in a world where they don’t always get what they want. Sometimes they are the ones who need to change, and parents will need to help them let go of their agendas and realize they can survive not getting their way. To do this, adults will need to accept that there is nothing wrong with a young child who has wants and wishes—like eating cookies for breakfast or staying up past bedtime. What is imperative is that adults don’t fall short of their responsibility to present life’s futilities, which are many, such as helping a three-year-old get to sleep when they claim, “I don’t want to go to bed. I’m nocturnal like my hamster.”

Helping a child accept something is futile is not a logical process but an emotional one. They are poor judges of what is futile and need help figuring out which pursuits can be fulfilled and which ones need to be relinquished. They can be incessant in their pursuit of something they want and adults will need to take an active role in helping them rest from futile endeavours. Efforts to talk a young child out of something in a reasonable and rational manner are usually doomed to failure. We need to go through their heart not their head for futility to register. They need to feel they are up against the limits and restrictions in life. We need to make it clear to their heart that something is not going to happen. We need to help them hear our "no" and be moved to accept it emotionally. Just like in a maze, a young child needs to feel where there is a dead end so that they can find another way through. As one four-year-old said when he realized his father wasn’t going to change his mind, “Daddy, I don’t like your no. I’m telling Mommy on you.”
many sad tears, and much comforting on her mother's part, Beatrice accepted the verdict and stopped asking for it. The mother was taken by surprise one month later when Beatrice asked for candy for breakfast again. A little frustrated, the mother replied with sarcasm, "Sure, you can have as much candy as you want for breakfast. Cookies and cake, too. Don't forget the ice cream in the freezer—get your bowl and fill it up!" Beatrice's eyes widened and her mouth opened, but nothing came out until she gasped and said, "Mama, you would need to be dead for that to happen!" The mother was reassured Beatrice had adapted but her spirit had not been crushed in the process. Beatrice knew candy was off limits for breakfast, but it didn't mean she had to stop desiring it.

**The Importance of Tears of Sadness**

Sad tears or disappointment are the ways we know futility has registered for a child. As developmental psychologist Aletha Solter states, "When children cry the hurt has already happened. Crying is not the hurt but the process of being unhurt." The capacity to cry tears in the face of emotional distress is uniquely human, according to neuroscientists, supporting Darwin's claim that they are a special form of expression reserved only for us. Tears have been associated with bringing relief, reducing tension, and restoring health. William Frey's research found that tears cried in sadness shed toxic waste products from the blood system. When tears are shed, there is also a release of oxytocin, the attachment chemical that inhibits the biological stress chemical cortisol. When children cry and receive comfort from attachment figures, this also increases oxytocin levels and decreases stress-related ones. In a young child, tears are the best indicator of an emotional system that is functioning well.

One of the problems with tears is that their expression is not equally supported for boys and girls. Current definitions of masculinity pressure parents to suppress boys' tears and vulnerable
feelings? Interestingly, this has not always been the case. Tears used to be a sign of virtue and good character in men. When tears are not invited to come forth, they can get stuck, and a child’s frustration can move into less vulnerable forms of expression, such as physical aggression.

Despite the restorative effect of tears for both girls and boys, they are threatened in a world that divides emotion into positive and negative categories, where happiness and calm are to be pursued at the expense of sadness and upset. William Blake wrote, “Joy and woe are woven fine,” suggesting that a fulfilling life consists of both happy and sad feelings. When we communicate to our children that there is something wrong with them for being sad, we thwart both their tears and an opportunity to rest from what they cannot change. A lack of support for tears comes at the expense of cultivating adaptation and resilience. Parents sometimes believe tears are a sign they are doing something wrong, whereas they are an indication that a child has trusted them with their heart.

Perhaps the root of societal and cultural resistance to tears is that they convey vulnerability and dependence. Evolutionary biologist Oren Hasson argues that the appearance of tears communicates a lowering of defences to make oneself more amenable to receiving comfort and caretaking. In a world that thrives on independence and pushes young children to grow up too fast, tears are the antithesis to this message. Tears signal dependence and convey a hunger to be cared for. Emotional survival for a young child requires being tethered to a caring adult.

Young children weren’t meant to take care of their feelings; they are just starting to learn names for them and don’t have control over them. We need to stop shifting our responsibility for a child’s upset onto their shoulders with statements such as “Control your temper,” “Calm down,” “Why can’t you figure this out?” “I have told you a hundred times…” “Stop being like that,” “Cut it out.” “You need to think more positively,” and the classic line “Why are you crying?

I’ll give you something to cry about.” We need to take care of their frustration and tears; they are the clearest signal to us a child needs help. Helping a child understand what is behind their tears is the goal, but children will not share their emotions with just anyone. The ability to help a child cry leads back to the dance of attachment and whether that child depends on a caretaker.

The beautiful thing about tears is they are always seeking expression, just like frustration. Sometimes the doorway to sadness will open in the most peculiar way—a stubbed toe, a broken toy, a lost teddy bear. Some parents are surprised by the volume and intensity of their child’s tears once a channel for them opens. When you understand that tears lie waiting to be expressed, it is easier to come alongside seemingly trivial incidents that help them get their tears out. One mother recalled watching her child with autism weep unexpectedly:

Alex had just emerged out of a year of intense alarm, horrifying phobias, great distress, more than I thought possible for a four-year-old to experience. One day, he was sitting at the computer and found some music, a melancholic madrigal. He was so touched by the beautiful sadness that he started crying. A soft, sad, deep crying—not the screaming, torturous protest I had been hearing all year. I hadn’t heard that kind of crying for so long.

The mother was moved to tears by her son’s emotional expression, amazed that this music could have drawn so much out of her son’s heart, and truly thankful that it had. One of the best gifts we can give our children is to value their sad tears and make room for them to flow.

A young child is an adaptive being waiting to unfold with the right caretaking by their parents. It is a messy process that is noisy, chaotic, violent, unpredictable, tiring, and rewarding as the fruits of adaptation come to life before our eyes. The best gift we can give a
young child is to help them find their sadness and tears when they’re up against the things they cannot change. They will be able to learn from their mistakes, be transformed by what they cannot change, and use their frustration to change the things they can. Sometimes the emotional force behind frustration can be quelled only by the surrender our tears bring as we are brought to rest from our futile pursuits. Tears bring a child to rest so that they can play and grow—we must become the tearjerkers and comforters our children require.

**Common Childhood Futilities**

MAD FEELINGS NEED to transform into sad ones when our children are up against the things they cannot change. Here are fifteen of the most common futilities faced by young children, along with four of the hardest ones for them to deal with.

1. **The futility of trying to hold on to good experiences.** When young children are having a good time, they don’t want it to end and who can blame them? Having to leave Grandma’s house or end a playdate or birthday party can provoke frustrated responses from young children. Anytime they have to transition, they have to say goodbye, and this may bring sadness and frustration with it.

2. **The futility of trying to make something work that doesn’t.** Young children believe adults can fix whatever doesn’t work, from broken toys to bad weather. They may tell us they want sunny weather on a cloudy day, or a store to open when it is closed. Their expectations have little to do with reality and everything to do with their desires.

3. **The futility of trying to possess a parent—or anyone, for that matter.** As soon as a child is born and the umbilical cord is cut, they are never as close to someone again. This doesn’t stop them from trying, and they move to claim and possess people for their own. Sharing their loved one with anyone will be hard and can result in territorial battles.

4. **The futility of wanting to send a sibling back where they came from.** Adapting to a new sibling often involves a path of frustration and many tears about all the things that change, including having less attention, more noise, and shared space. Four-year-old Gabriella said to her pregnant mother, “If you have a girl then I will call her ‘Garbage Can’ and throw her in the Dumpster. If you have a boy, then I will call him ‘Baby’ and go and buy him a special present.”

5. **The futility of wanting to be smarter than one is.** One of the futilities young children experience when they go to school is how they differ from other kids. They may want to read or throw a ball like another child or become frustrated as they compare their talents. They are not born with the realization that everyone is different and that many things are learned through trial and error. What young children see is the gap between where they are and where they want to be.

6. **The futility of wanting to be perfect or avoid failure.** Young children can become frustrated when they make mistakes or when the images they have in their head don’t come to life the way they envisioned. Towers fall to the ground and pictures look better in their imagination, leading to eruptions of frustration. Coming face to face with human imperfection is frustrating and calls for tears.

7. **The futility of trying to control circumstances.** There are many life events we cannot control, such as the passage of time and losing things we love. These can be experienced as very frustrating and alarming to young children. One mother wrote,
I remember my daughter when we first got baby chicks. We had
one little one that didn't look very healthy right from the begin-
nning. My daughter named him Humphrey. Over the next three
days we rallied for this chick to survive. She cried in anticipation of
his death because he was clearly not well. When the chick died, I
noticed that a part of me wanted to pretend it didn't happen, to say
he's "gone away" or he "died in the night," and remove all evidence
of his dead body to avoid her upset. Instead we left him for her to
see him dead in the morning. She cried and cried and cried. We buried
Humphrey with a little ceremony, and she cried and cried and cried.
We talked about Humphrey for months, and still the tears
would come. The next time we lost a chicken, about a year later, Jas-
mine had a few tears, and then said, "The second time is easier."

8. The futility of trying to turn back time or undo what's been done. Young
children will often change their minds and try to make a different
decision retroactively. They will eat their chocolate ice cream only
to turn around and tell you they really wanted vanilla. The idea of
permanence and not being able to undo what has been done is
hard for a young child to grasp and creates frustration.

9. The futility of trying to make magic work or to defy the laws of nature.
Early childhood is a time when the laws of nature are being
learned. A father of a young boy told me his son would erupt in
frustration every time he got his ball to a particular place in mid-
air, willing it to stay, only to become upset when it dropped to the
ground. Seeing the chasm between their imagination and reality
can be frustrating.

10. The futility of wanting to win all the time. When young children play
games, they often want to win—at all costs, even by cheating.
They will change the rules to suit their needs or make up new
ones along the way. I have heard kids say, "If you win it really
means you're losing, and if you lose it really means you're the
winner." One parent was aghast at my suggestion that young chil-
dren shouldn't always win. She asked, "Are you saying I shouldn't
let my five-year-old win at chess each time we play? He's just lit-
tle." I responded by asking her where she thought it best her child
learn about not being the winner all the time. She contemplated
this question and conceded that perhaps she did have a role to
play in preparing her son for losing on the playground at school.

11. The futility of wanting to be bigger than one is. When children compare
themselves to others, they may want to be taller, older, or bigger.
One five-year-old asked his father, "Can I tell people I am six
years old even when I am not?" When his father asked why, he
said, "Because everyone in the class is older than me and I want
to be six too." The father wisely replied, "You are what you are
and you can't change that."

12. The futility of wanting to be best and first at everything. Young children
have alpha instincts that seek expression, wanting to be first and
the best, and to get ahead of other people. "Poor losers" are kids
who haven't been helped to accept the futility of expecting to
always end up at the top. The jockeying for position among chil-
ren reveals itself as they butt in front of each other in school
lineups. It is important that a young child be prevented from
being first all the time and helped to realize that they can survive
this too.

13. The futility of wanting to be wanted where one isn't. Sometimes young
children aren't invited to birthday parties or playdates; some-
times their sibling doesn't want to play with them. Sometimes
adults need to help children find their sadness and tears when
they face rejection. Often adults hurry to smooth over troubled
peer relationships, insisting that all children should be friends, in
an endeavour to avoid hurt feelings. While this is understandable, especially for a child who experiences a lot of peer rejection, it is also important that a young child be able to read where they are not welcomed and respond accordingly.

14. The futility of wanting to know what’s going to happen. Sometimes young children want to know what is going to happen, often as a result of alarm and feelings of uncertainty, such as on the first day of preschool. Helping a child find their tears about the changes ahead and reassuring them they will be cared for will help ease their alarm and frustration about the unpredictable and the unknown.

15. The futility of wanting to avoid upset. Young children often want to avoid upset, such as being sad or bored. They may try to distract themselves or demand stimulation. Part of a parent’s role is to help them deal with the upsets that come with life, such as losing a balloon or dealing with ice cream that falls on the ground, and not attempt to prevent them altogether.

The Four Futilities That Are the Hardest to Face

1. Futility in the face of limits and restrictions. As soon as a young child starts to walk, their interests and desires come to life as they explore their environment. Children typically don’t like limits and restrictions being imposed on them, preferring to do whatever they want. They will insist that they want to play instead of have a nap, go outside without a jacket, or empty cupboards and drawers. Anytime adults place limits and restrictions on a young child, there is bound to be some frustration. It is important to not always use distraction or other measures to avoid upset and to help them find their tears.

2. The futility of trying to control other people’s actions and decisions. When young children aren’t able to control what other people do, they can become frustrated by their inability to alter outcomes. A four-year-old girl told her friend to stop messing up her table as they played house with their teddy bears. He didn’t listen, despite her repeated attempts to tell him to stop. In a desperate move she screamed at him and started to jab him with the plastic cutlery. He started to scream, unable to stop her stabbing, and yelled, “It wasn’t me. It was my teddy bear.” At that point, she started to jab his teddy bear with her fork. It’s hard when children realize they can’t control what other people do.

3. Futilies that derive from one’s own nature. Young children often want to master things their body is still learning to do, such as tie their shoes, click in a 5-point harness seatbelt, scale a climbing wall, colour inside the lines, or write their name. Sometimes children have disabilities that make movement or learning challenging. Physical or emotional limitations can be frustrating and call for tears to adapt to what is possible. Sensitive children often need to shed a lot of tears about all the things that do not work for them.

4. The futility of unachieved fulfillment. Fulfillment stems from achieving something we desired or wanted, but this isn’t always realistic or possible. Sometimes young children don’t get what they want, like the pet puppy or kitten they asked Santa for at Christmas. They have desires, agendas, demands, and needs that go unmet, and this will create frustration. As one boy exclaimed, “My brother’s birthday is the worst day of my life!” One of the hardest futilities to face based on unmet needs is separation from someone they want to be close to, like a parent who can’t be with them. This will raise alarm along with pursuit of their loved one and will be discussed further in chapter 8.
Helping a Young Child Adapt to the Futility in Life

1. HOW DO WE help a child when their frustration erupts and spews forth? How do we develop a relationship with their frustration in a way that helps them adapt to the futility in their life? The Neufeld Frustration Roundabout demonstrates the three possible outcomes to frustration and how parents can help move a child to adapt to what cannot change. Frustration has three possible outcomes when it is stirred up: (1) the child tries to change what does not work for them, (2) the child adapts to what they cannot change, or (3) the child moves to attack.

A Child Moves to Change What Does Not Work for Them

When a child is frustrated, one of the first things they may try to do is effect change by begging, pleading, or whining. Their frustration will disappear if a parent concedes to their request, but this is a judgement call that a parent makes each time. Considerations include the timing, the setting, and who will be saying no and dealing with the potential upset. A parent shouldn't say no just to prove a point. A child's capacity to adapt will be taxed when they are exhausted, hungry, or sick, making their frustration overwhelm them more easily.

If a child can't accept a “no” in a particular area, such as candy for breakfast, then the parent may want to represent futility on this issue until the child has accepted the limits and restrictions. If a parent always concedes, distracts, or bribes a child to avoid upset and tears, a child will have few experiences to adapt to and this will negatively impact their overall resiliency. If a child sees that a parent is continuously fearful or unsure how to handle their frustration, alpha problems can also arise. It is important that a parent read the child and the situation to determine when to say no and when to fulfill the child's desires.

If a parent isn't willing to meet a child's request, the child's frustration may be directed at changing the parent's mind, starting with questions such as "Why can't I?" A young child can be a relentless change agent who refuses to take no for an answer. The fatal mistake is telling them why you are saying "no" at this point. Parents can end up trapped in a logical conversation with their young child, with arguments made and countered, negotiations sought and refused. In the face of a child's incessant whys, parents can simply reflect that it is frustrating not to get the answer they want.

Two parents came to see me about the continuous debates they were having with their young child every time they said no, which led to extended tantrums. Upon closer examination, it became clear they were getting caught in a logical, circular conversation.

Teddy: "Please can I have another cookie, Daddy? They are so yummy."

Father: "No, you just had one now and earlier today too."
Teddy: "But you said I could have one after dinner."
Father: "I did give you one after dinner. That is it."
Teddy: "But why can't I have more? They are too little."
Father: "Because I said so. Cookies aren't good for you."
Teddy: "I ate all my vegetables. Please can I have one?"
Father: "No more cookies. I told you they're not good to eat before you go to bed."
Teddy: "Mommy lets me have more cookies. I want one more."

I asked the parents if they could just say no in a firm but caring way and avoid arguing and explaining their reasons to Teddy. He wasn't able to hear their "no" because when they argued with him, he thought he still had a chance to change their minds. Both parents began to laugh at my suggestion and said, "Deb, we are both lawyers, this is what we do all day—we argue, we debate, we are logical. It's so hard coming home to a preschooler. They require a totally different skill set." I wholeheartedly agreed and encouraged them to say no without negotiating so that they would help Teddy realize when things were futile.

2. A Child Adapts to What They Cannot Change

If we want a child to adapt to something that is futile, then we need to close the doorway to change and open the doorway to adaptation. Closing the doorway to change means we provide a clear and direct "no" to their request or agenda with little explanation. If the answer sinks in and futility registers emotionally, a child can be moved to adapt, can feel disappointment or sadness, and might even begin to cry. Sad tears signal that the doorway to adaptation has opened and a child is being changed by what they cannot have. In the wake of these tears, resilience and resourcefulness will arise. Once the child has accepted the parent's answer and adapted, then it is fine to share the reasons for the "no," as they are no longer moved to argue against those reasons.

When a child is frustrated and cannot effect change, the goal is to move them from "mad to sad." For this to happen, a child must be capable of having sad tears and have a good relationship with a caring adult who will help them get there. The adult needs to hold a young child in their frustration until the doorway to adaptation opens up. This is more of an art than a science and involves a three-step dance manoeuvre in which the parent becomes a double agent of both futility and comfort.

**STEP ONE**  To present what is futile, a parent needs to be clear about what cannot change. For example, "No, we are not taking your sister back and her name will not be Garbage Can."

**STEP TWO**  Holding a child in the experience of frustration means drawing out the frustration and coming alongside it, instead of arguing against it, discounting it, or punishing a child for it. For example,
"I know it's hard to have a new baby sister. You want things to go back to how they used to be." The child may reply with, "Yes! I don't like my sister—take her away!" Again, it is about holding the child in the futility of trying to change something that isn't going to change: "No, we are keeping your sister. I know you are frustrated with all the changes." Importantly, the parent is not trying to talk the child into liking their sister or to convince them they need to be a good brother or help out with the new baby. It isn't about talking them out of their frustration but about dancing them into sadness about what cannot change.

**STEP THREE** When the child seems more receptive and the futility is starting to sink in, try to draw out the sadness some more: "I know you're feeling sad about the changes. You liked it just being the two of us, and now we are three." The child may lament, "Take her back, oh, please. I don't want to be a big sister," as the tears start to fall. A parent should ideally be able to read the signs when their child’s frustration is softening and they are moving towards surrender. Whatever it takes to get the child over this hump is what a parent should aim to provide—a hug, a touch, silence, patience, or words such as "I am here and this is hard."

The dance from mad to sad is different with every child, as their emotions vary in intensity and vulnerability. A parent needs to read the cues, trust that mad will shift to sad, and hold course through the storm. A mother of a four-year-old relayed the following story in a parenting class one evening about the challenges in riding the frustration roundabout:

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THREE-STEP DANCE OF ADAPTATION

• **STEP ONE:** Present the Futility
• **STEP TWO:** Hold in the Experience
• **STEP THREE:** Draw out the Sadness
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Figure 7.4 Taken from Neufeld Making Sense of Aggression course

It all started when Chloe pushed her brother off a chair and insisted that it was hers. Ben started to cry, so I picked him up and told Chloe she couldn't have the chair. She launched into a tantrum and threw herself on the floor, screaming, "I want that chair!" I just let her scream, but my husband was nearby and asked, "What are you doing? You can't let her do that." I told him, "She's frustrated and she needs to get it out." I told Chloe I was here to give her a hug and understood it was frustrating. My husband whispered to me, "You're going to give her a hug for that?"

It was hard, but I stuck out the crying, the wailing, the stomping, the hand thumping on the floor until I heard the sound that let me know we are near the end—"Mama, Mama, I want to go home." It's like I can hear the gears shifting downwards inside her head, the sad tears start to fall, and I can finally move in to hug her. In my head all I can think is, "Sweet surrender at last—thank goodness!" and then I realize how tired I am.

I get that it's hard for my husband to understand what to do when she is so upset; he is still learning to feel his way through her tantrums. When she is upset like this, I just long for the tears to come, and do my best to hold on to her frustration and not to make matters worse.

The parents in the group acknowledged how tiring a child’s frustration can be to deal with as well as the need for emotional self-control. The mother added that although she isn't always as patient as she would like to be, she was surprised at how good it felt knowing that she could help her child find her tears.

To open the door to adaptation, a child needs a safe place to cry and a safe person to cry with. There are many reasons why adults struggle with helping a young child find their tears, the most common being lack of awareness of what is needed, lack of cultural support for and wisdom regarding intense emotions, fear of upset or of the child's reactions, a compulsive need to make things work
for a child, overdependence on reason, and lack of a strong enough relationship to bring the child to tears. When young children are frustrated and up against what they cannot change, they need agents of comfort who will hold on until their frustration can be released through their sadness or disappointment.

It is important to note that if a child does not have a soft heart or cannot shed tears in a vulnerable way, holding them in frustration will lead to escalating attacking energy. The first order of business will be to restore the child’s emotional vulnerability, as discussed in chapters 4, 5, and 6, before proceeding with helping them adapt to futilities in their life. Furthermore, a parent can’t present something as being futile unless they can control the circumstances around it. Areas such as toilet training, eating, sleeping, or any hygiene chores require the child’s cooperation, so holding them in futility here is hard. Battles around these types of activities are addressed in chapter 9. Most importantly, a parent doesn’t have to say no to every futility a child is up against and may choose to make something work for them too.

3. The Child Moves to Attack
When a child cannot feel the futility of changing something and the tears do not come, they will be moved to attack. There are many forms of attack depending on the sophistication of the child, including hitting, biting, throwing, tantrums, screaming, shaming, insults, sarcasm, put-downs, and even, for sensitive children, self-attack. Adults often intervene by asking an attacking child why they are so angry—“Why did you throw the toy?” or “Why did you hit your brother?”—which is a request for logic and reason. A child is moved to attack by the emotion of frustration; this is where a parent needs to focus. One mother described how she got caught up in her child’s attacking behaviour and missed how frustrated her son really was:

![Neufeld's Frustration Roundabout](attachment:image)

Figure 7.5 Taken from Neufeld Making Sense of Aggression course

When my son was about 3 he started randomly scratching kids in the face. It was infrequent, but we were alarmed at the behaviour and very confused about where it was coming from. I tried the usual “This is inappropriate,” cut-it-out approach, to no avail. I was embarrassed, frustrated, and couldn’t make sense of it. Looking back, I see there were many things frustrating him, and that was his outlet when it got too much.

The challenge with aggression is that when we focus on a child’s attacking behaviour, we lose our intuition about the frustration that is driving it. This often leads to the use of consequences and isolation to make a child cut it out and stop. These types of disciplinary tactics will only increase a child’s frustration. A mother of a five-year-old relayed the following story of how a well-intended response backfired and exacerbated her daughter’s attacking behaviour:
Alice asked for some stickers in a store and I said no. She had a meltdown. An older lady saw us and came over intending to help. She started talking to Alice and told her if she wasn’t quiet, Santa Claus wouldn’t bring her any presents. Alice let out a ferocious roar. What possessed this woman to use a threat to deal with my daughter’s frustration?! Couldn’t she see she was only adding fuel to the fire? Now Alice believed she wasn’t getting stickers and Christmas presents! I was so frustrated, I almost had a tantrum on the lady. Instead I told Alice Santa always comes to our house and it was okay that she was frustrated.

When a young child is full of attacking energy, the goal is to direct them back around the frustration roundabout to the door of adaptation by allowing some attacking energy to be vented, coming alongside their frustration, and making it safe for them and others. The goal is to lead them back to their sadness or tears. If a child has lost their tears and there is little sign of vulnerable feelings such as caring and sadness, then the goal will be to survive the incident with everyone’s dignity intact. For example, a parent might say, “This isn’t working. We are going to do something different,” or “I can see you are frustrated. We will talk about this later.” When tears are stuck, the focus must go to restoring the emotional system before proceeding towards adaptation.

If a parent responds with frustration to their child’s attacking behaviour, this will increase the child’s aggression and close the door to adaptation. A young child’s attacking energy is provocative for parents and often brings forth emotional responses from them. One parent described a time she could have responded differently to her daughter’s frustration:

We bought my four- and two-year-olds an expensive kitchen for Christmas. Money is tight for us, but we thought this was something they would really enjoy. One moment, they were looking at it, enjoying it, touching it, and exploring it. The next moment, my oldest had a very frustrated expression on her face and pushed over the kitchen. I was soooo frustrated. I interpreted this as ungratefulness. My daughter tried to open a door or drawer and it didn’t work. She was very frustrated and pushed it over. She was not “ungrateful” but very frustrated. I am sorry to say I didn’t do a good job dealing with her frustration and aggression, nor did I have a gracious invitation for all of her feelings. And I’m guessing that this is the struggle of many parents—to find their own mixed feelings so they can invite all that is within their children, even if it is foul frustration.

When a child is full of attacking energy, there are three relational principles to bear in mind so as to preserve one’s relationship with a child:

1. Depersonalize the attack. If the child is kicking, screaming, or biting, telling the child they are mean, bad, disappointing, and so forth will only increase their frustration and attacking energy. Depersonalizing the attack makes it about their behaviour but doesn’t convey judgement about it—for example, “Legs aren’t for kicking” or “Teeth aren’t for biting people.”

2. Focus on the frustration to preserve dignity and come alongside. Coming alongside a child’s feelings can help neutralize their frustration and bring them back around the roundabout to adaptation. For example, a parent might say, “Your teeth have bites in them because you are frustrated. I am going to help you with this.” It is important to preserve the child’s dignity when they are erupting so as to avoid adding to their frustration and alarm.

3. Convey that the relationship can take the weight of their emotions. When a child is attacking, the biggest threat they experience is a loss of
contact and closeness with their parent. When a parent conveys what doesn’t work, they need to convey that the relationship is still intact. This may mean telling the child, “I know you are having a hard time. I am still here,” or “We’re okay. I know you are upset. We’ll get through this.” The parent needs to take responsibility for preserving the relationship and not hold contact and closeness for ransom until the child apologizes. When separation is used in the face of a child’s attack, it will exacerbate the frustration and increase the likelihood of attack.

**Frustration and Tears in Sensitive Children**

For sensitive children, tantrums can be more intense, prolonged, and challenging in terms of getting them to tears. Their strong desires and caring can set them up for tremendous disappointment. They often imagine far more than they can ever actualize and become easily frustrated by their human imperfections. Their feelings can be big, overwhelming, and out of control. They need strong caretakers who can help them move through these storms, providing rest and reprieve from a world that feels too much. The challenge is that sensitive children often feel that they are too much for their parents to handle, are too big in their responses, and easily overwhelm others. It is critical that caretakers respond in ways that convey that they can take care of them and handle their behaviour and emotions, as well as ensure that separation is not used as a consequence or punishment.

There are three things that are helpful to consider when managing a sensitive child’s frustration and tears:

1. **Protect them from experiences that are too much.** When environments, relationships, and experiences are too much for a sensitive child, their caretakers need to read the situation and protect them accordingly. For example, a parent may sign a young child up for a music class only to experience them running for the door each time the noise starts. The child may find visual or auditory stimuli overwhelming, and as a result, need to spend shorter times in these environments, if any. Pushing them beyond their limits typically leads to the sensitive child either shutting down or exploding with upset. However, it is important for the adult to read what a child is capable of, even in small doses, and not shelter them altogether.

2. **Lead them into vulnerable territory.** Sensitive children are known for their avoidance of upsetting and alarming experiences. They may shy away from sad stories in books and get scared watching children’s TV shows. Parents need to walk them gently in these directions when needed and invite them to express what they are experiencing instead of pushing them forward. The sensitive child may try to deflect attention from their feelings, so reading the cues as to what is most difficult helps the adult understand what stirs them up most. When upsets happen, they may need a cooling off period to reduce the intensity of the experience. Afterward, they will be better able to talk about what stirred them up, but they will probably require an adult to lead them there. Acknowledging their feelings, naming and normalizing them, helps them form a better relationship with their internal world that often feels too overwhelming and busy.

3. **Debrief overwhelming situations outside the incident.** When discussing problem behaviour, it is best to deal with it outside the incident, in the context of a warm relationship, and touch the issue gently. Incidents are best deferred to when intense feelings have subsided. In the heat of the moment, a parent can simply inform a child, “The behaviour isn’t okay and we will talk about it later.” A child may reply, “I don’t want to talk about it,” to which a parent should respond that they will make it easy, quick, and as pain-free
as possible but that sometimes things need to be said and dealt with. When conveying what didn’t work, a parent needs to make sure to communicate that the relationship is still okay.

8

Alarmed by Disconnection
Bedtime, Separation, and Anxiety

And Max the king of all wild things was lonely and wanted to be where someone loved him best of all.

MAURICE SENDAK

"DON’T LIKE to sleep," yelled four-year-old Sadie midway into her bedtime routine. "It’s not fair—you get to sleep with each other and I have no one!!" Emily and Dan had grown weary of bedtime battles with Sadie and felt they were being held hostage each night. They were working hard to follow a bedtime ritual and be patient, but getting Sadie to sleep had become a nightmare.

When I asked them to describe how the battles unfolded, Emily said she usually worked from home in the evening, leaving Dan to do the bedtime routine. Sadie enjoyed being told stories and cuddling but not being left on her own. One night, all was going well until Dan went to leave her room, when Sadie jumped up in her bed and demanded that he stay. Dan told her, "It’s time for bed and you need to go to sleep. You’re going to be tired tomorrow if you don’t." Sadie pleaded with him, "No, Daddy, please stay! I don’t like the dark!" Dan turned on her night light and said, "You have to go to sleep. I have some work to do and so does Mommy." Dan settled Sadie back into bed and promised to check on her. He was gone five