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The Button Factory Bond

"So, what's wrong with this picture?" I thought, as I struggled through a speech about nutritious lunches and a brief recapitulation of rules of dress during parent evening at the school where I teach Kindergarten. A circle of stony adult faces greeted my remarks and I felt about as "at home" as a lobster in a stew pot. "Perhaps they're tired after a long day at work," I thought.

I bounced up from my chair, determined to make a change. "Okay, everybody, get your children and let's do a circle together." Parents quickly collected children from the child-care room, and the rumpus began. Eyes brightened and smiles tugged at the corners of their mouths as parents watched their children sing songs and move their hands in the rhythmic motions of our circle.

I coaxed the parents, and they began to join in the circle, enchanted at the sight of their four-year-old children singing and dancing fearlessly and happily together.

I have two classes; the children and their parents. The parents sometimes need comforting as much as their children, though they're usually less vocal about it. I have to read more subtle signs. It's hard for them to bring the children to school at times. They need reassurance that their children are doing well. They need communication when their children are having difficulties. They work hard at their jobs, raise other children, build a family, and tend to daily cares of living.

A crying four-year-old can seem like a matter-of-fact occurrence or a national disaster, depending on how it's handled.

At this age, the children are so closely connected with their parents that my observation of the parents is as necessary as my observation of the children. So I watch the parents as I work with the children in circle. "Ah! There's a smile. Gee, Drew's dad looks tired tonight. A bit of reserve there. I wonder how things are going." Spencer's dad, behind his video camera, is

a study in pure delight. My goal is to draw all the parents, with their children, into an evening of joy and sharing before we go out into the night, into our separate lives.

"All right, everyone. You can't be a true 'Daisy' parent until you've done 'Hello, My name is Joe.'" Parents who have participated in "Joe" before break into healthy grins. New parents look around in anticipation.

"Everyone down on the floor." Everyone, doctors, construction workers, pregnant mothers, dentists, accountants, architects, bakers, and their children sits on the floor in a circle with legs extended toward the center.

I started, "Hello, my name is Joe. I have a wife and five children and I work at the button factory, you know. One day my boss came to me. He said, 'Joe, are you busy?' I said, 'No.' He said, 'Push this button with your right hand.'"

I make it clear by my actions that Joe has to push these buttons a long way, from close, to as far as he can reach. Everybody, children and parents, gets with it, sitting on the floor forcefully and repeatedly pushing buttons with their right hands. I recite almost the same story but now with the left hand, and everyone pushes buttons with the left hand and right hand, rocking back and forth with the effort. Then, both hands and right foot.

Soon, everyone pumps away in unison, working together at the button factory, pushing buttons with both hands and both feet. Even the reserved mom of our newest student is down on the floor at the back of the room, working her heart out, and a relaxed and happy grin spreads over her face as she looks around at fellow factory workers.

"Push the button with your nose!" The effort of moving every part of your body at once fills the room and the children are delighted. "Look at Mom and Dad go! They're doing it with us!"

Smiles flash from face to face. I notice that the child on my left is a marvel of movement, not necessarily in coordination, but definitely energetic and creative. The joy is the thing!

"He said, 'Joe, are you busy?' I said 'YES!'"

After the resounding YES!, everyone collapses and laughs in the relief

and joy of having expended every effort they were capable of, then having a rest from it.

The "button factory bond" started new friendships between old parents and new. Parents served cake to their children and themselves. I circulated among parents and children, all of them laughing and talking like folks at a Sunday picnic. Children wove in and out and around the legs of their elders, playing their own childhood games. Barriers had fallen in the button factory, and I felt a sense of peace at sending children and their parents out into the night and back to their homes.