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Hold Me, Please

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During the infancy of our children, we automatically hold, rock, swaddle, and embrace them. Toward what end, do we even stop to wonder? Our goal is clear: to help them feel secure, close, warm, understood, and appropriately protected. As our children grow, it continues to be important that they be held, held in the literal sense, and “held” in the metaphorical sense. Providing a “holding environment” that changes as our children’s developmental needs change is just as critical as holding them close to us physically when they are babies.

During each life phase, children face developmental tasks, those skills that provide a foundation and stepping stone to the next phase. As preschoolers, children explore and learn about the environment, begin compliance with increasing environmental demands, and learn to accept necessary limits and restraints. They develop increasing closeness with the parent of the opposite gender or the parent who is not the primary caregiver. They move from a focus on self to the inclusion of others and develop increasing ability to engage in longer periods of quiet activity. During this stage, they need, from their holding environment, the love and affection of parents and other special adults. They need guidance and a pattern of behavior to follow as well as set limits and clear boundaries. They do best with simple, clear routines and guidelines, a safe environment for exploration, nurturing of fantasy and curiosity, and reading and conversation. They appreciate recognition of their increasing self-sufficiency but also need to be held accountable for feelings and behavior. They bask in calm and consistent parenting and teaching.

With entrance to kindergarten and over the next three or four years, our children work on more fully attaining a balance between self-sufficiency and sociability, demonstrating the ability to accept constructive criticism, showing increasing responsibility for and active participation in learning, and manifesting purposeful and constructive activity. They gain competence in self-care, clearer understanding of their role in the family and community, continue to work on trustworthiness, and show increased ability to make simple decisions and choices. They make progress with respect to mutuality and perspective taking, gain a more firm position in their peer group, and make and become a “best friend.” They increase their social skill repertoire and find a more consistent group of friends. Academic tasks place increasing emphasis on reading comprehension, more extensive writing, organization, study skills, and independent task initiation and completion. During fifth and sixth grade, children establish a firm sense of identity (“Me” vs. “Not

me”; “I know who I am”). Sex role is established, and beginning steps are taken to move them away from the family.

The holding environment during these years first needs to provide “wise guidance,” love, and nurturance as well as assurance of being loved and valued. Ongoing opportunity for physical movement, environmental exploration, intellectual stimulation and social activities is very important to our children, as is the freedom to use and further develop their own abilities. Provision of chores and other responsibility in gradually increasing increments provides readiness for lifelong tasks. A balance of independence and support works well. They need experience in and models for cooperating, sharing, owning and communicating feelings, delaying gratification, and increasing impulse control. Continued provision of limits and boundaries is critical. With respect to choices and decision making, it is important for adults to help children set goals and monitor progress toward them. Beginning instruction in conflict resolution and compromise is invaluable. Continued praise and encouragement, guidance in channeling interests, supervision for group activities, and a setting and structure for homework are crucial. Authority of parents and others is appropriately reinforced while work continues in terms of self-sufficiency, competence, role definition, expression of feelings, compromise, and conflict resolution. In pre-adolescence and early adolescence, the goal is set for mutuality and reciprocity in one-to-one relationships. The holding environment simultaneously holds on/confirms and begins to let go or contradict, providing for continuity and stability so changes and stabilization can occur. Family and school allow themselves to become secondary to peer groups while still maintaining appropriate expectations with respect to work, responsibility, and reciprocity.

As our children grow and develop, so, too, do we. Our skills increase. We learn to function more independently in the context of mutuality and reciprocity, seeking help and support as necessary. As always, home-school collaboration and partnering are hallmarks for fostering optimal development in our children, the world citizens of tomorrow.

May we be blessed in our work.