

# **TEACHING CHILDREN EMBODIED PEACEMAKING:**

**Body Awareness, Self-Regulation  
and Conflict Resolution**



**An E-Book by  
Paul Linden, Ph.D.**

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# **TEACHING CHILDREN EMBODIED PEACEMAKING**

Body Awareness, Self-Regulation and  
Conflict Resolution

Paul Linden, Ph.D.

First Edition

2006

CCMS Publications

[www.being-in-movement.com](http://www.being-in-movement.com)

Columbus, Ohio

TEACHING CHILDREN EMBODIED PEACEMAKING:  
Body Awareness, Self-Regulation, and Conflict Resolution  
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Published by CCMS Publications  
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Columbus, Ohio 43214 USA  
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www.being-in-movement.com

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First edition 2006

**Publisher's Cataloging-in-Publication**  
*(Provided by Quality Books, Inc.)*

Linden, Paul.

Teaching children embodied peacemaking [electronic resource] : body awareness, self-regulation and conflict resolution : an e-book / by Paul Linden. -- 1st ed.

p. cm.

System requirements: Adobe Acrobat Reader.

Mode of access: World Wide Web.

Includes index.

ISBN 0-9716261-6-2 (e-book)

1. Conflict management. 2. Interpersonal conflict in children. 3. Movement education. 4. Mind and body.  
I. Title.

HM1126.L55 2006

303.6'9  
QBI06-600141

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

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A number of years ago, when my son was in the fifth grade, my wife and I taught four hours of embodied peacemaking to each class in his school. The school already had a very nice program of conflict resolution and peer mediation, but it was all verbal and cognitive. It had to do with thinking and talking, and the body was left out of the equation. However peaceful a person may *wish* to be, their capacity to think, talk and act peacefully will be undermined if the *body* is not in a state of peace.

Conflicts cannot easily be resolved when the body is in a state of fight-or-flight arousal. Your internal emergency arousal interferes with your ability to think in flexible, constructive ways. It narrows your choices to opposition and conflict.

Your emergency arousal also reduces your opponent's ability to function effectively. Your non-verbal body language shows that you are feeling/thinking "*threat, danger, enemy, fight, run!*" and that non-verbal message will elicit the same fight-or-flight arousal in your opponent. His or her thinking will therefore also be narrowed to conflict and opposition.

The non-verbal fight-or-flight signals from your opponent reinforce your own emergency arousal, which in turn reinforces his. In other words, you and your opponent create a vicious circle.

Your emergency arousal also interferes with your ability to treat your opponent in empathetic, humane ways. However, treating others humanely is a crucial element in resolving conflicts peacefully and building a lasting peace. People have a deep need to be treated with kindness and respect, and satisfying that need is important in de-escalating conflicts and establishing cooperation.

And your opponent's emergency arousal interferes with his ability to treat you with kindness. Again, a vicious circle.

What is needed to complement the more traditional verbal/cognitive conflict approaches is a simple, practical way of placing your body into a state of peace. That makes it possible to create a benign circle, an interaction in which you and your opponent elicit from each other escalating responses of respect and kindness.

We taught the children in my son's school a simple, systematic way of putting the body into a state of relaxed alertness as an antidote to emergency arousal. This is an integrated state of awareness, power and kindness. In this state, you don't feel afraid of, angry at, or alienated from an attacker (or from yourself). In this state, you have the ability to speak words of peace from a peaceful place, a place which is strong and dignified, which evokes respect and encourages friendship.

On the last day of school, I went to help my son clear out his locker. As I was walking up to my son's room, a little boy plucked at my sleeve and stopped me on the stairs.

"Mr. Linden," he said. "Remember teaching us the Soft Tummy Breathing exercise?"

I remembered the class he had been in.

"Well, I was out on the playground, and an older kid came over. He was mean, and he wanted to steal my ball. I softened my breathing and I opened my body, and I said to him, 'I don't want to fight with you. Why don't we play with my ball together?' And so we played, and we didn't fight."

This an example of how body awareness can help children improve their abilities to create peace in the face of conflict. It is a simple, ideal example. Life is not always that simple, but the state of embodied peace forms a foundation for dealing with life's difficulties and complexities. This book focuses on practical methods for teaching children how to live effectively and peacefully.

The main part of the book will be devoted to simple, practical methods of teaching children to create the body state of peace. Since fun is the strongest foundation for effective learning, the exercises will be in the form of enjoyable games. In addition, since the experience of efficacy and success is the best anchor for new learning, the games will be oriented toward giving children the experience of their own capacity to do new and interesting things. The second section of the book will be brief descriptions of how to apply embodied peace in various daily activities.

The embodied state of peace is the foundation for effective conflict resolution and peacemaking. It also provides a foundation for effective functioning in just about any area of life. I have worked with children on enhancing their performance playing piano or playing soccer. I have worked with children with Attention Deficit Disorder and Asperger's Syndrome (a form of high-functioning autism). I have worked with children who have been abused. I have worked with children on study skills and test-taking anxiety. The state of calm alertness helps children (and adults) function better in any task or situation. The point is that applying the state of embodied peace in various activities is a form of daily practice: it improves one's skill in generating that state and thereby improves one's ability to use it in conflict situations.

## **THE DISTRESS RESPONSE**

Before we begin the practical study of how to create the state of embodied peace, it will be helpful to gain a better conceptual understanding of what the body state is and why it is helpful. The key is the body's *distress response*.

The body responds to any form of distress by contracting. When people feel threatened or challenged in any way, they typically contract their breathing, posture, movement, and attention, and this can take three related forms. It may take the form of tensing and hardening as a preparation for strength and effort. It may take the form



of stiffening and constricting in shock. It may take the form of collapsing and getting limp or dissociated (spaced out) in defeat. Or elements of these can combine.

Contracting the body reduces ease and effectiveness. Acting in a state of contraction is like driving a car with the parking brakes on. Doing any kind of movement when the breath and muscles are contracted (whether tensely or limply) will make the movement effortful, inefficient and awkward. But beyond this, the contraction response reduces the ability to think flexibly; it reduces the ability to function calmly; and it reduces emotional sensitivity and empathy.

The distress response plays a part in conflict. Fear, anger, and dissociation all make it difficult or impossible to function effectively, and they thereby actually escalate conflict.

A key to improving functioning for children (and adults) in life's daily activities is overcoming the distress contraction. Since the distress response is a physical response of contraction, it is possible to replace it with a physical response of expansion. The exercises in this book will all focus on creating and practicing a body state of expansiveness. This process is called *centering*.

## CENTERING

Centering is the antidote to the distress response. It is possible to prevent or overcome contraction by deliberately placing the body in a state of freedom, balance, and expansiveness. Contrary to our customary ways of being, action is much more efficient and effective when the body is relaxed, free and expansive. Every activity, whether it is primarily physical, intellectual, emotional, or spiritual will be done with greater ease and efficacy when the body is open.

The centered state is a state of wholeness and integrity. It can be described in different ways. Speaking in structural language, the state of integrity is one in which the musculoskeletal system is balanced and free of strain. Speaking functionally, this state allows stable, mobile and balanced movement. Speaking in psychological terms, this state involves reaching out into the world with a symmetrical, expansive awareness and intentionality<sup>1</sup> while simultaneously staying anchored in internal body awareness. Speaking in spiritual terms, this state is an integration of the body states of power and love. Whatever terms we choose to use, they refer to one and the same mindbody<sup>2</sup> state.

For some reason, it is easy and automatic for human beings to drop into the distress response, but centering needs to be learned, and it needs to be engaged in voluntarily and deliberately. The key to centering lies in developing and using body awareness.

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<sup>1</sup> What this means will become clearer as we go through various exercises.

<sup>2</sup> "Mindbody" is a term used in somatic education disciplines to refer to the whole person without any implication that "mind" is separate from "body."

## BODY AWARENESS

What is *body awareness*? The simple answer is that it is the ongoing process of feeling and noticing your body as you perform actions. That's a simple answer, but there is a lot hidden in it.

To begin with, most of us do not feel our bodies very clearly or fully, but since we don't have anything to compare it to, we don't notice how little we notice. Of course, we aren't directly aware of the negative effects of not noticing our bodies.

Being aware of your body means:

- feeling, sensing, savoring—
- the rhythms, tones, qualities, shapes—
- of your breathing, your muscles, your posture, your movements—
- how you deploy your attention within and outside of your body—
- how intentions shape muscle actions and movements—
- how all that is a response to what is happening to and around you—
- and how it affects your abilities to respond to what is happening to and around you.

The purpose of body awareness training is to wake up the human capacity for awareness and choice. Once you are aware of what you are doing as you do it, you will have the opportunity to choose among the various options for what you do and how you do it.

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## CHAPTER 2

# SOFT TUMMY

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Let's start with a simple exercise. This will introduce kids to the fear response and to a way of overcoming it.

However, let me first introduce two important safety concepts: *calibration* and the *safety contract*. In any conflict resolution exercise, a child who is, for example, strong, athletic and confident will probably have a very different response than a child who has been abused and neglected and is constantly anxious. It is important to know the children you are working with and calibrate the difficulty level of the exercises to their abilities and to their life experiences.

Calibrating an exercise means reducing or increasing its intensity. For example, in an exercise in responding calmly to a verbal attack, you can adjust the intensity of the attack upward by raising your voice and getting closer to the person being spoken to. Or you can adjust the intensity downward by lowering your voice and moving farther away.

However, it may not always be possible to know the children before you start working with them. You may be teaching a workshop and have no opportunity to learn about the children beforehand. In any case, it is never possible to fully know other human beings. It is important to explain to children that they have the right to adjust the exercises to their readiness. It is important that they be enlisted as partners in the process of calibration. And it is important that calibration be framed as a positive thing. For example, you could ask the kids: "Do you think it's smart to drive so fast that you lose control of the car and crash? Or is it smarter to drive more slowly until you get more experience?" And follow that with something like "In the same way, you will have the most fun with these exercises if you adjust them to what feels right to you."

Beyond just calibration, in order to safeguard the children, it is crucial to establish with them before you start the exercises an explicitly understood and agreed upon safety contract:

"You don't have to do anything don't want. You don't have to do any exercises you don't want to do. You can stop any exercise at any time just by saying 'Stop'." Conversely, it is also important to encourage hesitant children to go beyond their comfort zone and try new things. Of course, it is important to know when to encourage children to respect their limits and not overdo it.

### **TISSUES / SOFT TUMMY**

Ask the children if anyone wants to volunteer for being attacked with tissues. Almost always some brave kid will volunteer.

Explain to the child that you are going to throw tissues at him, and you want him to try to tell you what he does when you throw the tissues. Make sure to ask the child if it is OK to try the experiment.

If he says yes, then have him stand up, and you stand up in front of him. If you are teaching a group of younger children, say six to ten years old, put on a really silly, exaggerated look of menace. If the kids are older, a more realistic look of violence will be OK.

Then, from six feet (two meters) away, throw an unfolded tissue right at the child's face. You will have to judge how hard and violently to throw it. In any case, it won't reach the kid but will flutter harmlessly to the floor.

Even though it is just a tissue and obviously harmless, almost always the child will be startled and will flinch back. (Adults respond the same way.)

If the child is calm enough not to respond, crumple the tissue into a little ball, and throw it again. This time it will go faster and hit harder—though in reality it is still a trivial attack. Most likely, this time you will elicit a response. If the child is a baseball player and used to having things coming at his face, even this may not get a reaction. You will need to calibrate upwards, and the next exercise will show you how to do that.

Assuming the child did react, ask him what he did physically when you threw the tissue. He will probably not be able to give an answer. He may describe mental/emotional responses such as surprise, but that doesn't count as an answer to the specific question you asked. You can make the question a bit more focused by asking, "What did you do physically in your body? Did your breathing change? Did you move at all when I threw the tissues at you?" That may elicit some answers.

Ask the other children watching the demonstration what they saw the child do. The onlookers may see things that the subject of the experiment didn't notice about him/herself. That provides the opportunity to make the point that we don't always notice everything we do.

It also reinforces the idea of independent thinking. Just because the onlookers said they saw something doesn't mean the subject has to accept that. Were the onlookers right? Does the child who did the experiment know from his own experience and awareness that they were right?

It is important to test observations. You can throw tissues at the kid again, and he can see for himself whether the onlookers were right or not.

It is especially important for you as the teacher not to simply say what you saw him do (especially if you are teaching a single child in a private session). That puts you in the position of being an authority about his body rather than empowering him to notice and sense his own body for himself. If the child is not noticing something that you believe you saw, you can ask pointed but general questions and

then throw the tissues again. You could ask, for example, “When I throw the tissues at you again, can you tell what you do with your tummy? With your eyebrows? With your shoulders?” And throw the tissues again with each question.

Almost always the child will have tensed his tummy, constricted his breathing, hunched his shoulders, and moved away from you. It usually doesn’t take much to help a child notice those physical details.

Now comes the process of helping the child find an antidote to that arousal response. Explain and demonstrate that when people get angry, startled, afraid, or confused, they usually get smaller in their bodies. They can get smaller by getting hard and tight, by twisting themselves up and shrinking, or by getting too soft and limp. So the first thing to do is to investigate how to get small.

Rather than try to go directly to what is right, it is most efficient to amplify what is wrong. A child may not know how to do what is right, but she certainly knows how to do what is wrong. Increasing that and learning to discern what she is doing with which parts of her body is the first step in figuring out how to do the opposite actions, which will be the right ones.

Ask all the children to stand up, and then instruct them to tighten their stomachs really tight and hard. Then ask them to let their stomachs get soft and plop down loose. I call this relaxed state *soft tummy*. You could yourself demonstrate that process of tightening and loosening first.

Then go back to working with the child you used for the demonstration. Have him stand and focus on keeping his stomach soft and relaxed—even when you throw tissues at him again. Have him and the onlookers watch for what he does this time.

Most kids will find that they have no physical response to having the tissues thrown at them this time. Or at least it will be a greatly lessened response. They will not be disturbed by the attack. They will be able to stay relaxed and alert.

Make the point to the class that the ability to stay relaxed and alert when something or someone is giving you trouble is the foundation for being able to handle the trouble. (Just to be perfectly clear, I am not recommending that when some dangerous object is actually thrown at your face you stand calmly with no response. The tissue throwing exercise is solely for the purpose of teaching people to decrease fight-flight-freeze arousal.)

Next, instruct the kids to pair up, grab some tissues, and try the exercise with their partner. Make sure the exercise is broken down into clear chunks. First have the children experience the throwing without doing anything special to cope with it. Then gather everyone together in the large group to discuss what their responses were.

Next have all the kids practice Soft Tummy.

Then have them go back to their partners, and try having the tissues thrown at them again while they keep their tummies soft. And last, ask the group to gather for a discussion of what it was like that time.

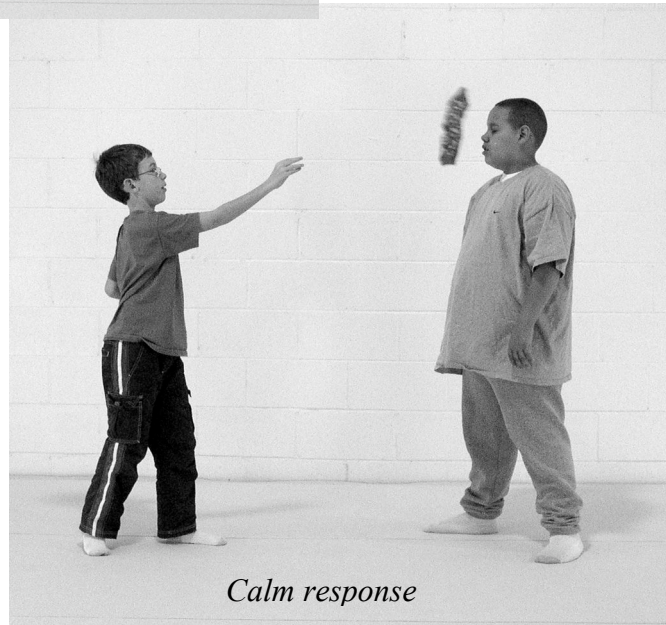


Some clear guidelines are important. Start the exercise by having everybody ask their partner if they are OK with doing it. If someone doesn't want to do it, congratulate them on being smart enough to know their limits. Make it clear that people are to be respected for being self-aware enough to know something isn't right for them.

It will only rarely happen that someone is too anxious to try. If that happens, suggest that their partner could stand back farther or even throw the tissues in the wrong direction altogether. That kind of thing usually takes the sting out of the attack. Very rarely will kids simply be lazy and choose not to try the exercise.

Have everybody stay at least six feet away from their partner. No physical contact between people!

Have the children pick one partner in each pair to do the throwing. Explain to the class that the child throwing the tissues will have one minute to throw the tissues, and then tell them when to start throwing. When the minute is up stop the group. Tell the second child to throw tissues at the first child, and give them a minute to do so.



Encourage everyone in the group discussions to share what they did physically and what they felt as they did it. Remind them that unique responses aren't wrong, just different.

My experience is that almost all children will realize very rapidly that when they released their tummies they reduced their tension responses to being attacked. End the exercise by telling the kids that the future exercises will build on this one and show them how to keep their cool in various situations.





## SUMMARY OF EMBODIED PEACEMAKING\*

### A Handout

This page summarizes the exercises in Paul Linden's e-book\*\* *Teaching Children Embodied Peacemaking: Body Awareness, Self-Regulation and Conflict Resolution*. If you are a young person and have been taken through the exercises, congratulations on completing them. Now you have to remember to use what you have learned.

If you are a parent whose children have been taught embodied peacemaking by a teacher, or a teacher with students who have been taught by their parents, this summary will help you understand and reinforce what your kids have learned. The words in italics are the *keywords* used in the teaching to summarize the ideas and experiences in embodied peacemaking. You can use the keywords to briefly remind your kids to remember and use what they've learned.

Fear and anger make you small. That could be tight and hard in your body, or it could be limp and weak, but in any case, being small doesn't work well. If you are scared or angry, you won't be able to think or talk or move effectively to resolve the conflict. If you are scared or angry, it will show, and that will make the other person scared or angry also. In order to do anything effective to handle a conflict, you have to be relaxed alert, and strong.

To relax, let your belly get soft and open up. Breathe low down in your belly. When you inhale, make sure your tummy gets bigger. Remember to use *Soft Tummy Breathing*. This is the simplest, most effective single thing you can do.

Relaxation means soft strength. Remember to use *Vertical Posture* when you sit or stand.

Strength means kindness. Remember to use *Smiling Heart*.

Confidence means being expansive. Remember to *Reach Out* in all directions.

Being sensitive to the person you are in conflict with helps you keep focus and communicate clearly with them. Remember to reach out and *Notice the Person*.

*Yielding* to power is a good way of controlling power. Remember not to waste energy getting stubborn and resisting.

Relaxing and breathing improves your concentration. You can use it to help in paying attention in class, in doing your homework, in your piano lessons, or in your soccer practice. You can use it anywhere.

There are so many times you could use your soft, strong body to avoid getting into fights: with your bother or sister, with your parents, with your friends, with people in your school, and with complete strangers.

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\*\* Purchasable at [www.being-in-movement.com](http://www.being-in-movement.com)

## **BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR**

PAUL LINDEN is a somatic educator and martial artist, founder of the Columbus Center for Movement Studies, and the developer of Being In Movement® mindbody training. He holds a B.A. in Philosophy and a Ph.D. in Physical Education, is an authorized instructor of the Feldenkrais Method® of somatic education, and holds a sixth degree black belt in Aikido as well as a first degree black belt in Karate. His work involves the application of body and movement awareness education to such topics as stress management, conflict resolution, performance improvement, and trauma recovery. In addition to this book, he has also written *Comfort at Your Computer: Body Awareness Training for Pain-Free Computer Use*; *Winning is Healing: Body Awareness and Empowerment for Abuse Survivors*; and *Feeling Aikido: Body Awareness Training as a Foundation for Aikido Practice*.

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