

## Kissing and Scolding

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“Some mothers” wrote Pearl Buck, “are kissing mothers and some are scolding mothers, but it is love just the same, and most mothers kiss and scold together.”

So, now, let’s see a show of hands. Who here had a scolding mother? Who had a kissing mother? Who had a scolding *and* kissing mother?

The truth in Pearl Buck’s words is unmistakable. As anyone who is a mother or has a mother or has known a mother knows, kissing and scolding go hand in hand in the art of mothering. I remember something similar from my own experience of nannying. When my charge was just learning to walk and headed toward an electrical outlet, for example, all I had to do was shout *No!* in a deep loud voice and he’d stop in his tracks, his lips would tremble, his face dissolve into tears—and then he’d run to me for comfort. I felt cruel, powerful, protective and loving all in the same instant.

In the learning curve of becoming a mother the scolding part is often more difficult than the kissing part. New mothers of infants, foster mothers, adoptive mothers of older children, step-mothers of children of any age, all these mothers, loving fiercely, wanting to be loved in return, fearful of alienating their children, desiring connection without complication, are tempted to skimp on the scolding. Child development experts teach that this is exactly the wrong approach. Children, of all ages, not only desire scolding (more commonly referred to by the experts as *limit setting*), they also thrive on it and need it in order to develop into full and healthy human beings. From newborns who appreciate being tightly swaddled to preschoolers who crave the security of limits on their behavior to teen-agers who rely on limits such as curfews to help them learn to make wise decisions, children are well served by the “scolding” aspect of mothering, if not always welcoming of it. Which is not to say either the experts or I advocate the “spare the rod spoil the child” theory of child rearing, but rather that we acknowledge limit setting or scolding as a necessary expression of love.

In the human vocabulary of words and gestures there are endless expressions of love—as the child in this morning’s responsive reading (adapted from *Say It!* by Charlotte Zolotow) found out. This is true of all human beings, but just for today, we’re focusing on mothers. Some mothers love by pointing out the wonders of nature to their loved ones and enjoying them together. Some mothers express love by introducing their children to the beauty and power of music, visual arts, and performing arts. All mothers love by speaking hard truths and telling little white lies—each in its turn. Some mothers express love with home cooked meals; others with take-out from a favorite neighborhood joint. Some mothers express love by allowing their children to be adopted, loved and raised by other families. And some mothers express love by opening their homes and their hearts to welcome children borne by other women. Mothers express love their love with organic veggies and elaborate Halloween

costumes and annual excursions with their children to buy Toys for Tots. Mothers express their love with lullabies and lectures, with Band-Aids and bag lunches and allowances and house rules. Mothers express love with tears and laughter and wailing in the night. Holding tight and letting go. With words and silence. With unpopular requirements like Sunday School and piano lessons. And by breaking the rules—forgetting bedtime once in a while, serving dessert first, allowing a school absence in order to take in a traveling exhibition at the museum or to join a protest.

“Say it! Say it!” children cry, in as many different ways as there are children. And their mothers respond, “I love you! I love you! I love you!” in as many different ways as there are mothers.

I was in elementary school at an interesting time in education. In first grade I was taught to read with Dick and Jane and Sally, Spot and Puff, Mother and Father. In second grade we field tested new readers, and by third grade our school had adopted a new set of readers—one that reflected a more urban and multi-cultural world. We developed our growing vocabulary and reading comprehension skills with stories such as “Mexicali Soup”—a sort of reverse Stone Soup tale in which each member of a large Latino family requested that Mama leave one ingredient or another out of the pot of beloved Mexicali Soup, until at last she served them plain hot water. Here was a mother far removed from that of Dick and Jane—plump and dark and smiling, cleverness slyly hidden beneath a cover of loving agreeability. Both Dick and Jane’s Mother and the Mama of “Mexicali Soup” were one dimensional characters, stereotypes of *middle-American Mother* and *immigrant urban Mama*. They were, in fact, each in their own way, the epitome of the Mother’s Day commercial mother—selfless, smiling homemakers whose children adore them, even while getting into messes or causing trouble.

Anne Lamott is a different kind of mother—a kind of mother more familiar to real life mothers and children alike. I love the pieces she writes about her experience as Sam’s mother. So raw, so funny, so, I imagine (not being a mother myself) so true. She captures the delicate, intricate, exhausting routine of juggling the kissing and scolding aspects of mothering. She offers tantalizing, if fleeting, glimpses of the rewards of that routine. And through it all, her love shines, reminding us that perfection is not a necessary prerequisite for motherhood.

On his show last year, the night before the second Sunday in May, Garrison Keillor raised the issue of equal pay for equal work as an appropriate, though atypically political, theme of Mother’s Day. I was raised steeped in the ideals of feminism, as indeed my mother was before me. Her father insisted, in the mid to late fifties, that his daughters attend college and prepare for a career, so as not to be dependent on a husband—though feminism as a movement was not yet on the horizon. Likewise my own parents raised my sister and brother and me to embrace the equality of the genders without ever uttering those words. The battle for the Equal Rights Amendment loomed in the background of my formative years, and, though I can’t recall a discussion of it in my home, I remember being disgusted, discouraged and frustrated when a high

school classmate announced she hoped it wouldn't pass because she didn't want to be forced to have a career instead of marriage and family. I went home and complained to my mom that she, my classmate, didn't get it. ERA wasn't about forcing women to do anything, give up anything, but rather about choices.

Despite the liberal, egalitarian atmosphere of my home and family, I was in college before I was introduced to the feminist movement in any formal sense—feminist critiques of literature primarily at that stage, later feminist critiques of the Bible in graduate school. It was also in college that I first heard a woman speak openly, directly about the challenges of being a mother and a career woman. My own mother had successfully combined a career as a substitute teacher with her mothering duties—home when we were home, working when we were in school—and if there were conflicts or challenges (and undoubtedly there were) she never spoke of them. But one of my professors at Hamline told us of long, tearful conversations she had with her infant daughter, explaining that she was sorry to leave her to go to work, but that she was happiest when working, and if she was happy she was a better mother.

Almost twenty-five years have passed since I was in college and the lot of mothers—in this society at least—may have improved with increased paid parental leave, corporate day care centers, flex-time and job sharing, and emerging role models but is still a mixed bag. The furor over Sarah Palin as working mother and vice-presidential candidate brought that reality to the forefront.

The facts of life have changed little, however. What mothers need, what children need for their mothers, is to be supported in their choices, understood in their complexity, trusted in their knowing, encouraged in their efforts to kiss and to scold at just the right moments, and embraced in their flaws and their gifts—for it is all love. May these blessings be bestowed upon the mothers among us and in our lives. May we be bearers of such blessings whenever we encounter mothers. And so, may all the children of the world be blessed through the hearty, precious, abundant love of their mothers. Amen.