



Eye to Eye: Gotta Get Down With Our Toddlers

by **Paul Kivel**

I LOVED PLAYING WITH ARIEL when he was a baby. He cradled in my arm like my body was meant to hold him. I could carry him easily, close to me, on my stomach in a snuggli, on my back in a backpack, or resting on my hip. I liked to just sit and feed him a bottle or watch him sleep. I picked him up, held him up, moved him about, sat with him—all at my level. Occasionally I would be on the floor putting objects in front of him to reach for but most of our time he was up in the air. Of course he would let me know when he was uncomfortable but he couldn't really initiate contact. Most of our interactions were on my terms.

So I was quite surprised when he started to toddle about so precariously but independently. I knew he would be learning to walk but I didn't think it would change our relationship so much. He still liked to be carried around on my shoulder or in a backpack sometimes but mostly he wanted to use his newly found walking ability to explore things at his level. That left me up in the air.

I soon realized that we were operating from different perspectives on the world. He was familiar with mine but I knew little about his. In addition, talking to him from my 5' 9" down to his 2 and a half feet reasserted my power and control and did not foster the more egalitarian relationship I wanted to build with him. Neither of us was comfortable with my talking down to him and his resistance to being talked down to was expressed loud and clear at times.

I decided to stoop to his level. I began to squat down to talk with him or gain his attention. But I couldn't stoop for long without feeling awkward and becoming physically uncomfortable. I realized that if I really wanted us to be able to talk and play together I had to actually sit on the ground, at his level. Just bending over for a minute, or squatting awkwardly for a while until I could stand up again was not going to allow me to really listen to and respond to him.

We set up a play rug and I started spending more time on it. We moved a beanbag chair into the living room so that I could sit comfortably at his height. I didn't start spending all my time on the



floor, but I made a conscious effort to be at his level more often, and to be more responsive to his desires. He could hug me or climb on me when he wanted to, and we could play games with materials that he could reach. Our physical give and take was not just at my initiative. I noticed that our time together regained some of the intimacy that we had established earlier.

I remember one time when he was playing contentedly by himself on a Saturday morning. I grabbed the newspaper and sat down on the beanbag chair nearby. It was very satisfying watching him play animatedly with his Duplos and I was just as comfortable as I would have been reading the paper at the kitchen table. (I guess that's what they call "parallel play"). Eventually he grew tired of building things, looked up and noticed me. He brought over his puppets and next thing I saw one peeking over the top of the newspaper, looking down on me and inviting me to play. Soon we were creating a story together from over the top of the newspaper which had become like a stage between us. Of course, I had to stop reading the paper in the middle of an article but I knew I could always get back to it later. Besides, it was much less interesting that the puppet show we came up with together.

In addition to having fun on the ground, I was surprised by how different the world looked from the floor or from his eye level. The world is more mysterious because you can't see around or over things. Objects really do disappear and reappear miraculously. The height of doorknobs and chairs seriously limits one's access to other places and to greater heights. Other people's legs are often curious shapes and occasionally dangerous. It is certainly not as easy to get an adult's attention from the level of their knee. These observations gave me a lot more understanding of Ariel's needs and concerns and reactions. Overall, we had a lot of fun on the floor.

I don't spend much time on the floor now that my children are grown. Less flexible knees and hips make me reluctant to get down even when I am around toddlers. But I will never lose the insights I gained from that vantage point. I know my relationship with my children shifted in important ways because I could see things from their height. We were able to continue relating to each other with the intimacy of eye to eye contact.

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