

THE KNOT OF TENSION

A Knot of Tension is a set of distressing feelings and behaviors linked to a particular situation.

Children often develop knots of tension around emotionally charged experiences, such as:

separations	bedtime	siblings/friends	meals
toilet training	giving up a pacifier	school/homework	chores/rules
losing at games	musical practice	medicine	transitions

These are all areas where *parents* tend to have anxiety or emotional intensity. In fact, it usually takes at least two people to “pull on the knot.” Knots are most likely when children feel powerless and isolated, and where parents feel helpless and frustrated.

These things tend to tighten the knot of tension:

Punishment, yelling, threats	Time-outs or other separations
Labeling a child as “bad”	Trying to “teach them a lesson”
Withdrawing love for misbehavior	Forced compliance
Attempts to control	Giving in and then resenting it

These things tend to loosen the knot of tension:

Laughter	Play*
Surprising and unexpected responses	Empathy for child’s feelings
Increased closeness	Avoidance of power struggles
Unconditional love	Release of feelings
Looking at our own behavior and feelings	Reconnection

*Two types of play loosen knots of tension best:

- One-on-one special time between a parent and child. The child is in charge of choosing what to do while the parent is extra enthusiastic.
- Playtimes where the parent gently introduces themes that are related to the knot of tension (for example, with tension about separation, you can playfully introduce lots of goodbyes and reunions).