



The Seeds of Compassion

She may be guilty of teddy-bear abuse, but when it comes to empathizing, this toddler is full of surprises.

BY LORI MILLER KASE

I can't help flinching when I see my 18-month-old, Sara, cradle her doll, kiss it tenderly, and then throw it on its head. Never mind that she is just a toddler who, tired of a plaything, has simply tossed it aside. I find myself scooping up the brutally discarded "baby," hugging it, and—for Sara's benefit—saying "Ouch, you hurt the baby."

It's just a toy, I know. But today a toy, tomorrow a playmate. I have visions of a playgroup from hell, in which Sara takes out her aggressions on the other kids and is shunned by them (or at least their mothers) forever. I guess I have some misguided notion that by pointing out to her that her doll is hurting, I can somehow teach her to be a compassionate person.

But for a long time the lesson seemed to be lost on my daughter. At around 13 months, Sara went through a brief (thank God) phase in which she would approach innocent babies and hit them on the head. And she takes such delight in seeing an adult pretend to cry that she will interrupt our play to demand that I "kye," laughing gleefully when I comply. I sometimes wonder whether I am watching the early manifestations of a sadistic personality or simply the antics of a child who has yet to learn empathy.

Admittedly, my lessons in compassion haven't extended much beyond the doll-comforting scenario. The truth is, I've assumed Sara is too young to understand what others feel. Maybe that's why I always react more harshly when my four-year-old, Brandon, hits (or sits on or smothers) his little sister than I do when Sara hits him. Sara is a baby, I tell him, she doesn't know

what she's doing, she doesn't realize it hurts. But recently, Sara surprised me—as toddlers so often do—by demonstrating that when it comes to the emotions of others, she may pick up on more than I give her credit for.

It was a Tuesday morning, and Sara greeted her babysitter with her usual ambivalence, running to the door in anticipation when Faviola arrived, then doing a 180 and clinging to me for dear life as Faviola crossed the threshold. Sara, who was clearly in the throes of serious separation anxiety that day, had convinced me to pick her up and was resting her head on my shoulder, arms locked around my neck.

While Sara was busy clinging, Faviola began to tell me about something that was bothering her, and then started to cry. She

