A Lesson From Nature: Cold Penguins to the Middle

Helping children and families understand the importance of compassion and support in an unpredictable world is challenging. Over the past ten years the metaphor below has proven to be a poignant reminder that allows us to reflect on the need for human connections following traumatic events and loss. We all have times of vulnerability and times of strength. Although it is aimed at parents and teachers, the profound meaning of this metaphor is equally applicable to every adult who helps children. And it is just possible that these words will help the caregivers as well.

It is said that in the extreme conditions of Antarctica, the Emperor penguins huddle in densely packed circles to keep each other warm and thriving. Healthy and fit adults whose temperature regulation is the most mature take up the periphery of the circle, and thus are buffeted the most by the frozen air and fierce winds. The youngest of those with more difficulty regulating body heat are permanently placed in the warm center of the huddle. The adult penguins on the outermost edges of the huddle periodically work their way into the center of the circle with the immature and infirm penguins, in order to regain their own body heat. Meanwhile, other robust adults take their places in the frigid outer circle. Thus the herd keeps up the body heat of the whole group without sacrificing the young or old, and giving those in the prime of life regular opportunities to warm themselves in the middle. Perhaps, the motto of the group might best be stated, “Cold penguins to the middle!”

Perhaps human beings are much like the penguins of Antarctica, we try desperately to keep safe and comforted in the midst of a crisis or during times of grief. At times we may feel very cold, needing heat and contact from those around us. However, at other times we are capable of offering warmth and protecting others. The lesson of the Emperor penguins will serve us well!

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Mary is a children’s literature expert and Donna is a child psychologist but we went to our colleagues at Liberty Science in NJ to research and confirm the Emperor Penguin’s survival strategies.

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