

## EXHIBITION OF EMOTIONS IN CHILDREN

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### **Trail of emotions**

It's not difficult to figure out how a child is feeling when she breaks into tears after her sister breaks her favorite toy. She's angry and sad.

Likewise, it's a pretty safe bet that a child who is wearing a big smile and humming along to his favourite song in the back seat of the car is feeling happy and content.

Such insights come naturally to most parents. But sometimes a child's emotions are less obvious, and like all of us, children can experience several emotions at the same time. To discover what a child is feeling at such times takes a little more work—like looking at a child's body language, listening for hints in a child's tone of voice, and searching for clues in a child's face. It also means increasing our awareness of our own emotions along with those of a child, including those feelings that are harder to identify (like disappointment, hurt feelings, or worry). Whether these emotions are easy to spot or not, they shouldn't be taken for granted. To become aware of a child's emotions, especially before they escalate out of control, can benefit everyone.

It may sound simple, but being aware of what your child is feeling—and why she is feeling it—can open up ways that will allow you to play a meaningful role in helping your child grow up happy, healthy and well-adjusted.

More and more, scientists are learning how children's emotional development can affect both their physical and mental health. Studies show that children who are 'emotionally intelligent' are more likely to be self-confident, do better in school, have fewer behavioral problems, have better overall health, get along better with friends and others, and weather their parents' marital

conflict better. Strong emotional health, in turn, makes them better prepared to deal with difficult events later in life.

It is not always so easy to figure out why your young one is feeling sad, puzzled, giddy, joyful, surprised, embarrassed, fearful or proud. Sometimes it can take a good bit of detective work to unravel what a child has on her mind.

It might not be apparent, but a boy who becomes sullen and angry with a younger sister may be feeling insecure with his place in the family and jealous of the attention she is getting. The reason a girl suddenly wants to stop going to her childcare center might have nothing to do with childcare at all. Instead she may be feeling rejected by a playmate at the center who found a new friend.

The hints to children's feelings aren't always written on their faces. Helping children develop the language to talk about emotions is an important part of the process. For example, they need to learn the words for emotions like disappointment, hurt feelings, sadness, and worry. But even before kids learn to express themselves, tuned-in adults can often decode children's messages by listening closely and trying to view the world from their point of view.

### **Looking for clues in make-believe.**

It's not uncommon for young ones—especially those under seven—to express their own fears and uncertainties while playing. A young girl, who is happily cuddling her doll, might suddenly say 'I do not like it when mommy and daddy yell at each other.' Take note when this happens. Children often use characters and scenes during make-believe to talk about difficult or confusing feelings.

Nightmares can also offer a glimpse into the child's emotional world, just as they do the adult's. Even at a young age, our subconscious mind finds ways of dealing with emotions that our conscious mind avoids. Comfort your child after a bad dream, explain the difference between dreams and reality, but keep an ear open for the real-life issues behind the nightmare.

### **Building connections through giggles and tears.**

As parents and caregivers, we experience the full range of our children's emotions nearly every day, and sometimes in ways that can stir up feelings in us, too. Who doesn't share a child's pride and happiness as he shows mom or dad a new drawing? On the other hand, it's hard not to get annoyed with a

child who would not stop howling in the grocery store because he wants to take something that you do not accept.

These emotional moments are the times kids naturally turn to adults and caregivers. The response they receive can have a dramatic effect on the way they learn to deal with feelings.

Whether happy or sad, children's emotions offer parents two very important things: an opportunity to build a deeper and more trusting relationship and a time to teach them how to deal with the wonderful world of human feelings.

Seeing emotional outbursts as an opportunity for bonding and teaching, rather than just another problem that needs solving, is a change in attitude that lies at the heart of building a child's 'emotional intelligence.'

### **Attitude is important.**

Viewing emotional moments as opportunities, rather than burdens, is not an attitude that comes naturally to everyone. We are all wired to deal with emotions differently. Some parents are more likely to dismiss their child's feelings as silly and unimportant. If a kid is feeling hurt or sad, they might say, 'That's life, and the sooner you realize that the better.' Others see negative emotions like sadness or anger as dangerous or harmful, and try to help their children get rid of them as quickly as possible by replacing them with more positive, happy feelings.

For others, displays of emotions just make them uncomfortable. They may try to avoid or ignore their children's feelings, resorting to bribery or threats to control their children's emotional behavior.

Both of those approaches can actually do more harm than good. Emotions—even negative ones—are not something to be dismissed or ignored; they are a normal part of being a happy, healthy, and fully-functioning person.

### **Learning how emotions work.**

For young children, emotions are new and sometimes overwhelming. Kids do not have the benefit of an adult's life experience to understand that the pain they feel when a pet dies will get better with time. Parents and caregivers who support and comfort their child during hard times become that much closer with their child. By offering guidance and experience, they teach the child to deal with feelings that will emerge time and time again in their lives.

Opportunities to teach a child aren't just limited to heavy emotional moments. As all adults know, feelings can escalate. What starts out as mild anxiety about getting the first injection can grow into a screaming fit once a child is in the doctor's cabin. By noticing and talking about feelings before they grow into a crisis, parents and caregivers not only defuse issues when they are small, they teach children an important problem-solving strategy.

### **Dealing with emotions**

From the very first time children wrinkle their brows, smile at a parent's face, or test the limits of their lungs with a hearty cry, it's obvious that emotions are a main part of being human. Feelings come naturally to all of us, and learning to deal with them is one of life's most important lessons.

We spend a lot of time teaching our children simple things such as tying their shoes, yet we often expect them to learn how to handle complex feelings like anger, sadness and frustration without much help.

### **Labeling emotions**

These are feelings that come naturally to children. But how do you help them learn to cope with such emotions in a way that promotes both mental and physical health? The answer can be as simple as giving feelings a name.

Children often lack the basic vocabulary necessary to make sense of the emotions they feel, whether it is jealousy, hurt, fear or worry. Caregivers who tell a child with tears streaming down her cheek, "You are feeling sad now, aren't you?" or a child in the midst of a foot-stomping tantrum, "I can see you are feeling angry," perform an important task. Those who help teach their children to name their emotions give them a valuable, lifelong skill.

Putting a name to the emotion not only helps children make sense of what they are feeling. Research studies suggest that it also helps calm their nervous systems and helps them recover faster from upsetting situations.

Studies from various laboratories show that the act of naming an emotion has a quieting effect on the nervous system, which may in turn help children to recover faster from emotional stress. Exactly why this happens remains unclear, but some scientists believe it has to do with the brain's structure and how emotions are processed. In the brain, there are certain areas primarily responsible for processing emotions, and other areas primarily responsible for handling logical thinking and language. What's important here are the

connections between these areas, and neuroscientists are studying these connections very closely.

Verbalizing an emotion engages the language area in the left side of the brain, which is also an area involved in logic and other higher-level types of thinking. Dr. Gottman believes that naming an emotion stimulates the nerve cells in this area, which may activate connections between this 'logic' area and areas of emotion processing. Activating these connections may help a child to think about the emotion in a different way, leading to a calming effect.

Labeling emotions seems like a simple approach, but sometimes it is not as easy as it sounds. First, caregivers need to be aware of what their children are feeling, so that they can help find the best word to describe these feelings. That can be tricky. Like adults, children can experience mixed emotions. A child with a new baby sister on the way may feel both excited for the new arrival and anxious about the way life at home will change. Exploring the full range of emotions will reassure a child that it is normal to experience conflicting feelings.

There is another powerful reason to help children find the right words for their emotional experiences—it's a way of showing empathy. For some caregivers, a child's emotional outburst can be a time of intense frustration and annoyance. But for others, it provides a perfect opportunity to both teach and grow closer to their child. Labeling an emotion not only gives children a word for what they are feeling, it shows that they are understood, and that is something all of us find comforting.

Helping a child learn how to cope successfully with a problem is one of the most rewarding moments for a parent or caregiver. Giving children the skills to deal with the world around them is what parents and caregivers are supposed to do. Kids should be given the freedom to experience all emotions to their fullest, but they also need to understand the difference between appropriate and inappropriate behavior. With this combination of valuing emotions while setting limits on behavior, parents can help children learn to find solutions to the challenges they will face as they grow into adults.

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