

## Helping Children Develop Awareness of Emotions

Some parents have a tough time identifying their children's feelings. Often parents are concerned about their children's feelings, but are unsure how to respond. Adults may find it difficult to identify their own emotions, so imagine how confused a child might be about their own feelings.

Feelings are important for parents to discuss with their children. Children may not have the words to express what they are feeling. For that reason, children may try to express their emotions through negative behaviors such as fighting or yelling. If parents are able to talk about anger with their child, they can help their child express anger in a more positive way.

There are benefits to helping children express and identify their feelings. Children who are able to talk about or express their feelings are less likely to be aggressive toward others or have behavioral problems.



### What is emotional intelligence?

Emotional intelligence involves being aware of one's own feelings and dealing with emotions in a positive way. Using emotions in this way can help motivate a child reach their goals, feel understood, and develop the ability to learn about and handle other's emotions. There are ways in which parents can help their child become emotionally intelligent. One way is by coaching.

According to Dr. John Gottman, parents can become emotion coaches for their children. Emotion coaches help their children name and talk about feelings they may have. Emotion coaches also point out for their children that having feelings is okay. In

addition, parents who are emotion coaches model for their children proper ways to express feelings.

From more than a decade of research, Dr. Gottman discovered that children with parents who encouraged conversations about feelings had different developmental abilities than the children of other parents.

Dr. Gottman's research demonstrated that emotion-coached children:

- Are able to notice changes in their moods.
- Are better at comforting themselves when they are upset.
- Could calm down their hearts faster after something upsetting happens.
- Have fewer infectious illnesses.
- Are better at focusing attention.
- Relate better to other people, even in tough situations like getting teased in school.
- Are better at understanding people.
- Have better friendships with other children.
- Are better in school situations that require academic performance.

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In the beginning of Dr. Gottman's book, *Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child*, he explains, "In my research, I discovered that love by itself wasn't enough to become a good parent. Very concerned, warm, and involved parents often had attitudes toward their own and their children's emotions that got in the way of being able to talk to their children when they were sad, afraid, or angry. While love by itself was not enough, channeling that caring into some basic skills that parents practice as if they were coaching their children in the area of emotion, was enough. The secret is in how parents interacted with their children when emotions ran hot."

Parents who are emotion coaches:

- Become aware of a child's emotions.
- Recognize emotional expression as an opportunity to teach and bond.
- Listen with compassion and recognize a child's feelings.
- Give emotions a name.
- Set limits and problem-solve.

According to Dr. Gottman, parents can use a variety of ways to become better emotion coaches. First, ignore your own parent "goal" and pay attention to the current situation. Second, pretend what it would be like to be the child in this situation and try to imagine what the child might be feeling. Third, do not try to solve the problem yourself, but instead try to relate to the child's experience and respect their ideas. Next, giving choices and teaching children how to come up with solutions can help them feel more control over the situation. Finally, be consistent and patient—emotional coaching occurs over time, not in just one circumstance.

#### References:

Gottman, J. (1997). *Raising an emotional intelligent child*. New York: Fireside.

Recker, N. (2001). Emotional Intelligence... What is it? *Family tapestries: Strengthening family bonds* (Fact Sheet FLM-FS-15-01). The Ohio State University Extension. Retrieved August 30, 2006 from <http://ohioline.osu.edu/flm01/pdf/FS15.pdf>

## Reading and Talking About Emotions

A great way to begin talking to your child about emotions is through reading together. *What Makes Me Happy?* is a children's book that gives good examples of events that trigger common emotions. The book asks what makes the child laugh, cry, bored, proud, jealous, scared, sad, excited, shy, mad, and happy. It provides a chance for parents to talk about feelings and how we



experience and manage them.

For example, in response to the question "what makes me cry?" the book offers: "wasps that sting, a fall from a swing, wobbly wheels, head over heels." After enjoying the drama and rhyme, a parent might ask, "what makes you cry?" A child may tell about a recent crisis or a remembered disappointment. One of the best ways to help teach emotional intelligence in children is by allowing and gently prompting them to explore their emotions.

Parents can also talk with their children about times in their own life when they have experienced these same feelings. It can be useful for children to know that adults have pains and struggles also.

#### Reference:

Catherine and Laurence Anholt (1994). *What makes me happy?* Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press.

## Children and Play

Another way in which parents can help and teach children to express their feelings is through play. Children are able to work out their frustrations through play. This is especially important for younger children who have difficulty using words. Parents who are actively involved in play with their children allow their children to feel important and develop positive play behaviors, such as sharing. Children who have had experience playing with their parents are often able to play well with others.

Play can include a variety of activities such as drawing, painting, puppet shows, play dough, board games, music, and outside play. Parents should encourage their children to express themselves through play. During play, parents may have the opportunity



to discuss their child's feelings. For example, if a child built a tower and accidentally knocked it down, the parent can respond by saying, "you're upset that you knocked the tower over."

There are several activities in which parents can play with their children:

- Play exercise games with your child.
- Interact with your child: talk, laugh, and listen.
- Give your child hugs and compliments throughout the day.

- Sing songs with your child.
- Sit on a blanket and listen to music together.

Parents who play with their children build a closer relationship, and it provides a good chance to talk about their feelings. There are several benefits to playing with your child. So, make the time and have fun!

**Reference:**

Jones, B., R. (2004). *Playing with your child*. Childhood Education, 80, 272.

## Ten Things You Can Do To Teach Children about Emotions

1. **Focus on strengths.** Talk first about what your child did well. Then talk about what can be improved. Praise specific strengths. Don't just criticize what was wrong.
2. **Follow up with consequences for misbehavior.** Sometimes parents say things in anger that don't curb the behavior in the long run. Decide on consequences that are fair, and then carry them out.
3. **Ask children how they feel.** When you do, the message is that their feelings matter and you care.
4. **Find ways to stay calm when angry.** It's normal to get angry or irritated sometimes. Learn to recognize "trigger situations" and do something about them before you lose control. Try taking deep breaths or have a "quiet area" to go to. As a family, talk about what everyone can do to stay calm.
5. **Avoid humiliating or mocking your child.** This can make children feel bad about themselves. It can lead to a lack of self-confidence and, in turn, problems with schoolwork, illness, and trouble getting along with friends. Unfair criticism and sarcasm also hurts the bond of trust between children and parents. Be mindful of how you speak to your children. Give them the room to make mistakes as they learn new skills.
6. **Be willing to apologize.** Parents need to be able to apologize to their children if what they said was not what they meant. Calmly explain what you really wanted to say. By doing this you're being a good role model and showing how important it is to apologize after hurting someone.
7. **Give children choices and respect their wishes.** When children have a chance to make choices, they learn how to solve problems. If you make all their choices for them, they'll never learn this key skill. Giving children ways to express preferences and make decisions shows that their ideas and feelings matter.
8. **Ask questions that help children solve problems on their own.** When parents hear their child has a problem, it's tempting to step in and take over. But this can harm a child's ability to find solutions on his or her own. A helpful approach is to ask good questions. Examples include, "What do you think you can do in this situation?" and "If you choose this solution, what will be the consequences?"
9. **Read books and stories together.** This is a way to share something enjoyable and learn together. Stories can be a way to explore how people deal with common issues like making or losing friends or handling conflicts.
10. **Encourage sharing and helping.** There are many ways to do this in your community, with neighbors or other families. This teaches children that what they do can make a difference in the lives of others.



## Source:

*Schools, Parents, and Social and Emotional Learning: Ten Things You Can Do at Home*. Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), University of Illinois at Chicago, Department of Psychology. Retrieved September 7, 2006 from <http://www.casel.org/downloads/Packet%20final%2010-20-03.pdf>

## Books

To learn more about teaching children how to deal with and express feelings, check out these books:

- *Between Parent and Child*, by Haim Ginott, Alice Ginott, & H. W. Goddard (Three Rivers Press, 2003).
- *Emotionally Intelligent Parenting: How to Raise a Self-Disciplined, Responsible, Socially Skilled Child*, by Maurice Elias, Steven Tobias, and Brian Friedlander (Harmony Books, 1999).
- *Emotional Intelligence: Why it Can Matter More than IQ*, by Daniel Goleman (Bantam, 1994).
- *Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child: The Heart of Parenting*, by John Gottman (Simon & Schuster, 1997).
- *Raising a Thinking Preteen*, by Myrna Shure (Henry Holt, 2000).



- *Raising a Thinking Child: Help Your Young Child To Resolve Everyday Conflicts and Get Along With Others: The "I Can Problem Solve" Program*, by Myrna Shure (Pocket Books, 1996).

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