

Toddler Emotions

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Toddlers are full of emotions. On any given day, they can range from giggles of glee to sobs of misery. How we respond to their emotions helps to shape their perception of their feelings and their skills at handling them.

How NOT to Respond to Children's Emotions

John Gottman describes ways that parents respond to emotions that are not helpful for developing emotional intelligence. The Dismissing parent tells the child "there's no reason to be unhappy" or tries to distract the child without addressing the feelings or their causes. The child feels ignored, feels like their feelings are irrelevant, and won't come to the parent for support in the future. The Disapproving parent scolds or punishes a child for expressing negative emotions. The child feels ashamed of his emotions and thinks something is wrong with him when he has feelings. The Laissez-Faire parent says "Your feelings are all OK, do anything you need to do to let it out. The child *does* learn that it's OK to have feelings, but they're not given any guidance on managing them or any limits on their behavior. This will cause difficulty in school and social situations.

Dr. Becky Bailey has YouTube videos which demonstrate dismissing, punishing, ignoring, rescuing, and helpful emotion coaching in an entertaining, memorable manner: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4pHvNMHuLBY>

How TO Respond: Emotion Coaching

Gottman also observed parents who responded positively: they labeled emotions and empathized with the child, but also set limits and provided guidance on how to express the emotions appropriately. Gottman used these observations to develop the 5 Steps of Emotion Coaching

Step 1: Be Aware of Emotions. Throughout the day, stay tuned in to your child's lower-intensity feelings. Watch body language. What cues tell you how he's feeling? Also tune into your own emotions: children learn by watching how you react to things, how you show your feelings, and how you manage intense feelings.

Step 2: Connect with your Child – Recognize emotional expression as a chance to connect and to teach. If you were raised in a family where emotions were not talked about or welcomed, you might want to pull away from an unhappy child, or try to talk her out of her feelings quickly. Instead, try to move in closer when your child is expressing emotions. Encourage your child to talk about her emotions. Try to see things from her perspective.

Step 3: Listen to your Child – Validate their Feelings. Don't dismiss his feelings, or tell him that he's foolish to feel that way. Let him know you take him seriously. Ask him to put his feelings into simple statements: "I feel ____." Use reflective listening "it sounds like you feel ____." Show that you understand.

Step 4: Name Emotions. Even before your child can talk, you can teach the words that describe emotions. You can talk about a wide range of emotions, when people feel them, and how people express them. Talk about how you feel. When your child is emotional, help her identify how she *does* feel, without telling her how she *should* feel. When a child can name her feelings, she can manage them better.

Step 5: Find Solutions. Validate emotions but set limits on behavior.

- a. Set limits. Let them know that it's OK to feel angry / sad / disappointed. But, set limits on problem behavior. Discipline misbehaving children for what they *do*, not how they *feel*.

- b. Identify goals. Ask them what they want or need.
- c. Think of solutions. For older children, allow them to brainstorm a wide variety of possible solutions. For a two year old, you offer two suggested solutions. For a three year old, give three choices.
- d. Evaluate the solutions. Explore which they think would work better.
- e. Let your child choose the solution.

Emotion Coaching is not always possible. If you are in a hurry, or out in public, or in a place where safety is an issue (e.g. a parking lot), or too upset yourself to be effective, you may need to just do anything you can to get the situation under control, and talk it through later.

Emotional Intelligence

Talking about feelings and learning how to manage them helps children develop emotional intelligence.

Emotional intelligence falls into multiple domains:

- Self-awareness – recognizing and understanding your own emotions
- Self-soothing – capable of managing your emotions
- Empathy – recognizing emotions in others
- Handling relationships – managing other’s emotions

Benefits of Emotional Intelligence

Children and adults with a high degree of emotional intelligence gain many benefits:

- They know it’s OK to experience a wide range of emotions
- They have fewer negative emotions *and* they can calm themselves down more quickly
- Develop an array of skills for handling everyday frustrations and bouncing back from major challenges
- They do better in school and at work – partially because they’re better at focusing attention
- They have more empathy – which helps them succeed in relationships; they form stronger friendships
- Have fewer infectious illnesses
- Were less likely to experience peer rejection, negative interactions with teachers, and school failure

Your Role as a Parent

Your job is to provide role modelling and support for how to handle emotions, not to guarantee your child is always happy. As parents, we can’t ensure that our children are never sad. And facing and overcoming life’s little sadnesses helps your child build emotional resilience and coping skills that will help him master the big sadnesses that may come his way. We also can’t ensure our children are never angry. Often we are the direct cause of their anger as we set limits, and give guidance about appropriate behavior. If we can set clear limits and follow them consistently, even in the face of our child’s anger or tears, we help to prepare them for school, for work, and for life. But we can set limits in a way that still validates their emotional experience.

Most Recommended Sources

- Emotional Coaching http://www.mandalachildrenshouse.com/DYK/Emotional_Coaching_5_05.pdf
- Tantrum tips: www.parentingcounts.org/professionals/parenting-handouts/information-for-parents-temper-tantrums.pdf
- 12 ways to Support Emotional Literacy, from Becoming the Parent You Want to Be: <http://lifelistsblog.wordpress.com/2008/08/01/12-ways-to-support-childrens-emotional-literacy/>