



Cultivating Child Development Series

Emotion and Behaviour

Handling children's negative emotions (4-6 years old)

One of the most frustrating things that parents have to cope with may be their children's negative emotions. Parents are often quick to react to, rather than respond to those emotions due to embarrassment or annoyance. Unfortunately, parental reactions may lead to more significant behavioural or emotional problems, either immediately or in the long run. We often hear parents say things like, "knock it off immediately", "if you don't stop your crying now, I will never bring you out again", or "why do you act like this every time?" Sometimes, parents respond by reasoning with their children, about why their behaviours are so wrong and what constitutes of good behaviours, in the hopes of that the children will "come to their senses" and start acting rationally and responsibly. These tactics are doomed to fail if parents only focus on the behavioural aspects of the children's emotions, namely, the crying, shouting, whining, pouting, etc.

Responding to children's emotion

When children are upset, logic often does not work until parents respond to their emotional needs. Parents need to understand the basics of emotions and take steps toward coaching children's emotion.



Understanding the function and meaning of emotions

Parents should understand that emotions are meaningful and functional. They provide us with information about ourselves and the environment, and help us respond quickly to important situations and prepare us for actions. Every emotion has (1) a bodily felt sense, (2) a name, (3) a need, and (4) an action tendency. Take anger for an example. Anger (name of emotion) may give a racing heart, hot flushes, and tension in the body (a bodily felt sense). It tells us that we need to set a boundary (need) and drives us to take actions to defend the boundary (action tendency).

Becoming children's emotion coaches

To handle children's negative emotions, parents need to become their children's emotion coaches. Parents need to attend to the emotion, label the emotion, validate the emotion, and meet the emotional or practical needs of their children. Approach the children's feelings in a non-judgmental way rather than becoming entangled in the children's words and behaviours when children are upset. Children may say very hurtful things or threaten to hurt themselves or others when they are emotional. It is easy for parents to get caught up in haze of children's negativity. Parents are quick to criticize children as being wrong and get into a command-and-demand mode – to command children's behaviour and demand immediate compliance.

However, criticism, judgments, commands, and demands during an emotional outburst will likely fuel the children's negativity and make matters worse. It is important for parents to keep in mind that children's emotions reflect needs and are signals for help. While the children's behaviours may be wrong, their emotions are not. Instead, try to validate and support their emotions.



Validating and supporting children's Emotion

There are two key components to coaching children's emotions – validation and support. The first and most important component is for parents to correctly label the emotion and to convey understanding of children's emotional experiences; to validate and prove that "I get it". Try using the following expression:

"I can understand why you may feel..... (insert emotional experience here, such as hurt, angry, frustrated, etc.) because..... (insert reasons here, such as you think it's unfair, mommy always says no, it is a very difficult task, etc.)."

The "reasons" may be postulations or conjectures even if they do not reflect the reality. Just take some guesses as to why children are feeling so upset and what is bothering them on the inside. Most likely the parents' guesses are correct because they know their children better than anyone else in the world. What matters is to help children feel understood and know that parents are seeing things from their perspectives. Be sincere in helping children process their emotions and make them feel understood, rather than using mockery, passing judgments, or showing despise.

The second component is to support children's emotional needs by offering comfort, reassurance, or space. It is important to let children know that they are safe and protected from actual danger. Out of good will, parents are often too eager to offer solutions and encouragements. They want to help children feel better by rationalizing or putting a positive spin on the situation. To some parents, that is the way of offering support. However, parents must realize that the foundation of emotional support lies upon accepting and validating the negative emotions. It is only when the emotional parts of the brain are settled that the logical parts could kick in.

For different emotions, there are different ways to offer support. It is important to soothe and comfort children's sadness, assert boundaries for anger, validate and reassure shame, as well as to challenge anxiety-provoking thoughts. Below are some examples on how to validate and offer support to these emotions:



To soothe and comfort sadness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>“I see that you are very sad now because your friend cannot come over to play. It is okay to be sad, dear.”</i> • <i>“You must be very disappointed that we cannot go to the park now because it’s raining. I would be disappointed too.”</i>
To assert boundaries for anger	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>“I see that you’re angry now because someone just took your toy, but it is not ok to hit or shout at others.”</i> • <i>“I understand that you’re very frustrated now because you couldn’t get the balloon in your favourite colour. Let’s step aside to drink some water and take have a minute to cool off.”</i>
To validate and reassure shame	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>“You must be feeling embarrassed that you forgot the dance moves. It’s ok, I’m here for you!”</i> • <i>“It is a pity that you didn’t know the answer to the teacher’s question. No wonder you’re upset.”</i>
To challenge anxiety-provoking thoughts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>“I understand that you’re feeling scared, but let’s take a look and see if there really is a monster in the closet?”</i> • <i>“I know that you’re worried about the thunderstorm and heavy rain, but we’re absolutely safe at home.”</i>

Parents may need to seek professional help to learn more specific techniques and to accumulate experiences through everyday practices.



Reduction of problematic behaviours is the outcome of effectively processing emotions – it is the parents’ bonus for being their children’s emotion coach! Parents must remember that handling children’s negative emotions is not just about stopping problematic behaviours. Of course, it helps parents survive challenging moments amidst busy and hectic life schedules, but the bigger goal is to help children learn how to regulate their emotions in the long run. Every emotional outburst is a chance for parents to become intimate with their children. It is a chance for parents to coach children through the steps of emotion regulation, so that eventually, as they grow and master the skills, children will be able to soothe and regulate their own emotions in time of crises. When children are able to regulate their emotions, much more of their cognitive resources can go toward problem-solving, creativity, and relationship-building.

Emotion regulation for parents

In addition to helping children learn to regulate their emotions, parents must also be sensitive to and respond to their own emotional needs. After all, parents must practice what they preach in order for it to be effective. Children learn by observing how parents respond to others and to events. It is important for parents to reflect upon their typical responses to upsetting events. Do you yell and blame others? Do you become negative and critical? Do you lose hope and give up?

Providing a model for children on the expression and regulation of emotions may be a very difficult task for parents who are not used to processing their own emotions. Indeed, many parents are not taught to process emotions in their upbringing. They may be accustomed to dismissing or disapproving their emotions (“just tough it up”). If that is the case, parents may want to start becoming mindful of their inner dialogues, thoughts, and feelings towards events. Adequately processing their own emotions will help parents regulate their reactions towards children’s emotions and provide a stable emotional context in which to put children. Also, parents may try to imagine how they want to be responded to when they are upset. Putting themselves in someone else's shoes will help parents come up with ways to help their children feel understood and supported.



More tips on creating connections and validating emotions:

- ✓ Getting down to their level, establishing and maintaining eye-contact
- ✓ Using relaxed and empathetic facial expressions
- ✓ Using a soft and calm tone of voice
- ✓ Taking non-threatening postures and showing empathetic gestures (it doesn't hurt to add in humour from time to time, e.g. mimicking your child's postures or facial expressions)
- ✓ Choosing the right time to respond, wait until children have finished speaking or expressing themselves
- ✓ Noticing the intensity of your responses, e.g. staying calm, being patient
- ✓ Monitoring your bodily movements, e.g. bending down, slow and relaxed movements
- ✓ Using physical touch, such as tapping on the shoulder or giving a hug

References and further reading:

1. Emotion-Focused Family Therapy. <http://www.emotionfocusedfamilytherapy.org>
2. Gottman, J. M. & Declaire, J. (1998). *Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child: The Heart of Parenting*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.
3. Havighurst, S. S., Kehoe, C. E., Harley, A. E., & Wilson, K. R. (2015). Tuning in to Kids: An emotion focused parenting intervention for children with disruptive behaviour problems. *Child and Adolescent Mental Health, 41-50*.
4. Siegel, D. J. & Bryson, T. P. (2012). *The Whole-Brain Child: 12 Revolutionary Strategies to Nurture Your Child's Developing Mind*. London: Constable and Robinson.
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