

Emotions: Helping Young Children Cope with Emotions

Summary: Learning to manage emotions is as important a skill as walking and talking, and the way that children learn about how to identify, express and manage their emotions is from observing and watching the adults around them.



Introduction

Your child was not born knowing how to control feelings or calm down, and needs to learn this from you. You are your child's first and most important teacher. A loving relationship with your child is the best way you can help him or her learn to deal with difficult feelings.

Unpleasant Feelings that Your Child May Have

Anger

Anger is a common feeling and temper tantrums are normal in young children. They are your child's way of letting you know that he or she is feeling angry, upset or frustrated. Try to find out what is bothering your child and respond differently depending on what is wrong.

- If your child is hitting another child, teach your child that he or she must not do that.
- If your child is tired or sick, hold and comfort your child.
- If your child is asking for something that he or she should not have, do not give in, even if your child gets angry. Your child needs to learn that there are some things he or she cannot have.

Being firm and loving are important. Yelling, screaming, nagging, or hitting can harm your child. Here are some healthier suggestions to help your child:

1. Bend or sit down so that you talk directly to your child.
2. Tell your child calmly that you understand that he or she is angry (upset) and needs to calm down.
3. Your child may need a short time alone to calm down. Some people call this "time-out." Do not use this to punish your child. Make sure your child does not think you are leaving. Say that you will stay close to make sure everything is OK. Your child needs to understand that this is a chance to calm down and learn control. You, too, may need this time to calm down
4. Praise your child as soon as he or she calms down.

5. Help your child learn the words for feelings so that he or she can talk about them.

Fears and Worries

Fears and worries are also common. Your child may be afraid of monsters, of the dark, or of new situations.

It is important to accept your child's fears. Do not tease or get angry. Keep calm. Try to get your child to talk about what is bothering him or her. And suggest things to say or do when he or she is afraid.

Sadness

Adults can find it hard to believe that young children get sad. But they do. The same things that make you sad can make your child sad. It is normal for your child to be sad when a pet dies or a toy disappears.

Try to find out what is making your child sad and get him or her to talk about it. Give your child a little more attention and cuddling to help him or her become interested in things again.

Jealousy

Being jealous is normal. Your young child will find it hard to share toys with others. And they will not like sharing your attention. For example, your child may get demanding when you talk to other people on the telephone, or when there is a new baby in the family.

When this happens, calmly tell your child that you understand that he or she would like your attention right now but you are busy. Get your child to do something close to you, and say that you will be with him or her soon.

Think about how you would like to be helped when you are upset. Chances are your child wants the same kind of help.

When you get angry with your child, you can help your child by:

- saying that you are sorry for getting angry

- explaining what is making you angry

- showing how you deal with your own anger by calming yourself, for example, by breathing deeply and counting slowly to 10. Your child will learn from your example.

Most of all, your child needs to feel that you are calm and are not getting caught up in his or her strong feelings. No one expects you to be perfect. Try to understand your child; each child is different, and your child may be easy or difficult to get along with. Calmly make sure that your child understands which behaviours are not acceptable and help him or her deal with feelings that might be causing the behaviour.

How you respond to your child most of the time is what matters. Tell your child when he or she does

something well. Your child loves you and wants to please you more than anything. Remember that you are the most important teacher your child will ever have.

How You May Feel

When your child expresses strong feelings, sometimes you might get almost as angry or upset as your child. You may not have as much patience as you would like. You might feel helpless and not know what to do, or you might feel that you can't take your child's crying or whining anymore. It isn't easy being a parent. Try to tell yourself that the situation is not worth getting upset about or talk things over with a friend or another parent who has a child about the same age as yours.

Before you respond, try to put yourself in your child's place. Would you like to be yelled at in public or at home? If you are upset, does it help when you are teased?

Authors and Copyright

Written and copyrighted by the Infant Mental Health Promotion Team at the Hospital for Sick Children, <http://www.sickkids.ca/imp>.

eMentalHealth.ca generously thanks the Infant Mental Health Promotion Team for permission to post this article.

For More Information

Information from this article is excerpted from the video, "A Simple Gift: Comforting Your Baby". This program provides specific information about the development and importance of the infant's attachment relationship with parents in the first year of life, and shows how parents can respond so that their children learn to develop securely. Suitable for parents from many cultures and backgrounds.

Video available from Infant Mental Health Promotion (IMP), c/o The Hospital for Sick Children, 555 University Avenue, Toronto, Ontario M5G 1X8, Phone (416) 813-7654 x 1082, Fax (416) 813-2258, imp.mail@sickkids.ca, <http://www.sickkids.ca/imp>.

Disclaimer

This information is general advice only. If your relationship with your child is becoming very difficult or upsetting, or your child's behaviour is becoming very difficult to deal with, you need more advice. You might talk to your doctor or a public health nurse or call the children's mental health centre close to where you live.

Date Posted: Jul 8, 2009

Date of Last Revision: Apr 12, 2012