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Emotions: Helping Young Children Cope with Emotions

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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 them 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 they feel 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, we can validate their frustration and teach them how to express their frustration in other ways without hitting.
- If your child is tired or sick, hold and comfort your child.
- If your child is asking for something they should not have, do not give in, even if your child gets angry. Your child needs to learn that there are some things they cannot have.

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

- Bend or sit down so that you talk directly to your child.
- Tell your child calmly that you understand that they are angry (upset) and need to calm down.
- 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.
- Give positive feedback when your child is calmer, e.g. "I am so glad you are feeling better."
- Help your child learn the words for feelings so that they can talk about them.

Fears and Worries

Fears and worries are also common. Your child may be afraid of monsters, of the dark, or 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 them. And suggest things to say or do when they are 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 them to talk about it. Give your child a little more attention and cuddling to help them 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 a new baby is in the family.

When this happens, calmly tell your child that you understand they 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 them 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 their 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 unacceptable and help them 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 they do 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?

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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. It 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 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.