Helping little (and big) ones with big feelings: Emotion coaching our children
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• Family researcher for 12 years
• Focus on communication processes in contemporary families
• Adoptive mother, researcher, and advocate
• Teacher, researcher, and consultant
• Adopting Communication, LLC: A Family communication education organization
  • Combining family science with the art of relationships
  • Change your talk. Change your family. Change your life
Kate Weir, Ed.S, LPC-S, Registered Play Therapist-S

- Mental Health Field for 15 more than years
- Began my counseling career in Wilmington, NC at a family counseling agency
- Former Professional School Counselor at the Elementary and Middle School levels
- Currently work in Private Practice and Direct a Wellness Collective
- Play Therapy, teaching and supervising are my passions
- Mother to one; Aunt to 8
Objectives

• Gain understanding of the function of emotion in daily lives
• Gain strategies for providing children with an emotional vocabulary
• Gain strategies for strengthening children’s ability to identify their own emotions
• Gain understanding of importance of the full range of emotions
• Learn the ACT model for setting limits and giving choices in moments of emotional intensity
• Gain strategies for viewing strong emotions as an opportunity for connection
ASCA Standards & Competencies

SE 1: Understanding Self and Others
- Self-concept
- Respect for self and others
- Personal responsibility
- Safe and healthy choices
- Coping skills
Emotional Development: Why are Children’s Feelings So Strong?

- Limited Control
  - Children are still learning to manage emotions, so emotions are often expressed in strong ways.

- Time
  - Children do not understand that feelings will pass. Each mood feels like it will last forever.

- Single-mindedness
  - Young children can only identify one feeling at a time that they are having
    - One feeling is not softened by another

Source: 2007, Is This A Phase: Child Development & Parent Strategies, Helen F. Neville, Parenting Press
The importance of feelings

- Children’s feelings have a PURPOSE

- There is a direct connection between how children feel and how they behave:
  - How can we best help children to feel secure?
  - By accepting their feelings.
    - Steady denial of feelings can confuse and enrage kids. It also teaches them not to know what their feelings are and not to trust them.

Predictors of success in adulthood

- Emotional regulation
- Emotional intelligence

Source: 1998, Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child, Gottman, DeClaire, & Goleman, Simon & Schuster
Emotion dismissing

• Strong feelings as “poisons” that are harmful to child
• Try to change child emotions from negative to positive
• Action oriented:
  • “Just smile”
  • Fix it: “What do you need to feel better?”
  • “Here’s what you need to do”
  • ”Don’t worry about it, it’s fine”
• Message: get over “negative” feelings

Source: 1998, Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child, Gottman, DeClaire, & Goleman, Simon & Schuster
Emotion dismissing responses

• Deny feelings
  • There’s no reason to be upset.
  • You are probably over-reacting.

• Provide a “philosophical response”
  • Look, life is just like that sometimes.
  • We don’t always get what we want.

• Give Advice
  • Immediately ask questions
  • Defend another involved party
  • Take pity
    • You poor thing!
An alternative: Emotion Coaching

Emotions are moments for connection
Benefits of Emotion Coaching

- Higher achievement
- Better impulse control, delayed gratification
- Fewer infectious illnesses
- Require less discipline, whine less
- Buffers from divorce effects
Five Steps of Emotion Coaching

1. Be aware of the child’s emotions
2. Recognize the emotion as an opportunity for connection and teaching
3. Help the child label the emotions
4. Communicate empathy and understanding
5. Set limits while giving the child choices

Source: 1998, Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child, Gottman, DeClaire, & Goleman, Simon & Schuster
Step 5: Set limits
(Yes, we’re starting at step 5!)
Setting limits

• “All feelings can be accepted. Certain actions must be limited.”

• Important to separate the behavior from the feeling – they are connected but different. Feelings are acceptable and natural. Behaviors are to be regulated and controlled.

Why set limits?

• To protect the child from hurting self or others
• To protect property
• Providing children with consistent limits helps them feel safe and secure

Basic limit setting

1. Start by saying the child’s name
2. Reflect their feeling
3. Set the limit
4. Give acceptable alternative(s)

A-c-t

• A = Acknowledge the child’s feeling or desire
• C = Communicate the limit (be concise and clear)
• T = Target acceptable alternative(s)

• Examples:
  • Jaymond, you are angry at your sister. But sisters are not for hitting. If you want to hit something, you can hit the punching bag.
  • Luisa, you are so excited. But beds are not for jumping on. If you want to jump, you can jump on the trampoline or on the floor.

Step 1: Be aware of the child’s emotions
Feelings vocabulary

- Some Words for Unpleasant Feelings
  - Angry
  - Bored
  - Confused
  - Disappointed
  - Frustrated
  - Guilty
  - Hurt
  - Left out
  - Put Down
  - Miserable
  - Worthless

- Some Words for Pleasant Feelings
  - Appreciated
  - Better
  - Comfortable
  - Excited
  - Grateful
  - Great
  - Happy
  - Pleased
  - Proud
  - Relieved
  - Satisfied
A deeper look at anger

• Anger
  • “Don’t be mad! Fix your face!” aka Bruno Mars
    • Anger is a natural and important emotion that should be accepted and respected
    • Anger communicates important messages (something is wrong, a need is going unmet)
    • Too often we encourage the suppression of anger which can lead to anxiety and feelings of depression
  • Anger Rules:
    • It is OK to get mad
    • It is not OK to:
      • Hurt self
      • Hurt others
      • Hurt property
Anger Iceberg

Icebergs are large pieces of ice found floating in the open ocean. What you can see from the surface can be misleading. Most of the iceberg is hidden below the water.

This is how anger works. Often when we are angry, there are other emotions hidden under the surface.

Angry

embarrassed  scared  grief
shame  tricked  overwhelmed
distrustful  frustrated  disgusted
attacked  grumpy  stressed
guilt  trapped  rejected
trauma  anonymous  nervous
anonymously  exhausted  helpful
exhausted  helpless  anxious
disrespected  disappointed  envy
envious  attacked  offended
uncomfortable  worried  insure
regret  lonely

Source: https://www.gottman.com/blog/the-anger-iceberg/
Gender differences in emotion

- Society has gendered expectations for how our boys and girls will experience and express emotions
  - Girls are more rewarded and boys are punished for expressing sadness and fear
  - Anger is more accepted in boys than girls
- Women tend to be more involved in emotional socialization
  - More mothers than fathers
  - More female teachers and practitioners than male

Step 2: Recognize the emotion as an opportunity for connection and teaching
If you don't listen eagerly to the little stuff when they are little, they won't tell you the big stuff when they are big, because to them all of it has always been big stuff.

-C.M Wallace

“When someone really listens to me, really acknowledges my inner pain, really provides the opportunity for me to talk more about what is troubling me, then I begin to feel less upset, less confused and more able to cope with my feelings and my problem.”

Step 3: Help the child label the emotions
How to identify emotions

Adult: “What’s wrong? “
Child: “I don’t know!”

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=reJpo-GaopM&list=PLkcL9Y5Tc7Iy-QNzgNDlr0fwV_bGPoW2u&index=2
How Do Children Learn About Feelings and How to Handle Them?

• Children Learn Names for Feelings
  • If we name emotions *while kids feel them*, they can easily connect the word to the feeling
    • “You look so excited!”
    • “You look so interested when you’re reading about history.”
    • “You seem so content and at peace when you are drawing.”
  • For strong emotions, children learn new words more easily after the meltdown has subsided
    • “You were scared when that big dog barked!”
  • It is important to provide children with an emotional vocabulary

HELPING CHILDREN NAME THEIR FEELINGS

• Emotions posters with sticky-notes (and nerf guns!)
• Feelings flash cards
• Feelings charades
• Books about emotions
Help Children Put Their Feelings Into Action

Children often cannot *think* their way out of upset feelings. They have to *do* something.

- Stomp feet
- Throw/kick balls
- Yoga/stretching, dance, sports, physical activity
- Sing
- Play musical instruments

- Rip, tear, squeeze squish
- Sand
- Play games
  - Aggressive release games such as whack-a-mole
  - Don’t break the ice
- Create
Step 4: Communicate empathy and understanding
What is empathy?

• The language of *acceptance*; particularly the acceptance of another’s feelings and personal experience of a situation.

*Source: 2012, How To Talk So Kids Will Listen & Listen So Kids Will Talk, Adele Faber & Elaine Mazlish, Avon Books*
“CONSIDER MY POINT OF VIEW AND ACKNOWLEDGE IT AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE... EVEN IF IT SEEMS RIDICULOUS OR WRONG. THERE ARE NO WRONG DESIRES OR FEELINGS, JUST WRONG WAYS OF ACTING ON THEM, RIGHT? I NEED TO KNOW THAT IT’S OKAY TO HAVE THESE FEELINGS AND THAT YOU’LL UNDERSTAND AND KEEP ON LOVING ME.”

JANET LANSBURY
Enacting empathy with our children

- Listen with full attention
- Respond with a single word
  - Ex: “Ooh.” “Mm.” “I see.”
- Give them their wishes in fantasy
  - I wish I could make those bananas ripe for you right now!
  - I wish I had a magic wand and could make all those jelly beans red for you.
  - I really wish you could see your mom right now too.
- Identify, acknowledge, and validate the feeling

Some empathetic responses:

- It's ok to be ... (sad, angry, anxious)
- I hear you.
- I will help you work it out.
- It doesn't feel fair.
- This is really hard.
- That was really scary.
- You are safe.
- I am right here.

- I've got you.
- There's a better way to show your big feelings.
- We'll work on it together ... tomorrow.
- You are never alone in your anger.
- You are never alone in your fears.
- I'm here. We're here together.
- I'll stay close so you can find me when you are ready.

Kathleen Fleming, http://www.majesticunicorn.biz/blog/2015/10/20/broken-things
Choose your response

**Dismiss the feeling**
- Deny feelings
- Provide a “philosophical response”
- Give Advice
- Immediately ask questions
- Defend another involved party
- Take pity

**Engage the feeling**
- Listen with full attention
- Identify, acknowledge, and validate the feeling
- Respond with a single word
- Give them their wishes in fantasy
When responding to children’s feelings:

- Be a Thermostat, Not a Thermometer
  - Thermostats set the climate; thermometers respond/react to the climate
  - Learn to RESPOND rather than REACT
  - The child’s feelings are not YOUR feelings and you do not need to escalate with him/her.

- Share your calm, don’t join their chaos

When responding to children’s feelings:

• Be their safe person
  • Their feelings are ok with you
  • They aren’t worried about your reaction
  • They can count on you to give empathy and not judgement

• You cannot calm the storm. But you can calm yourself and wait for the storm to pass.
Step 5: Set limits
(Circle back)
What have you gained:

- Gain understanding of the function of emotion in daily lives
- Gain strategies for providing children with an emotional vocabulary
- Gain strategies for strengthening children’s ability to identify their own emotions
- Gain understanding of importance of the full range of emotions
- Learn the ACT model for setting limits and giving choices in moments of emotional intensity
- Gain strategies for viewing strong emotions as an opportunity for connection
Keep in Touch

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