

Dealing With Feelings: Emotional Health

Article from the KVIE PBS website: <http://www.pbs.org/wholechild/parents/dealing.html>

It takes a lot of patience combined with good judgment and warm, nurturing relationships to raise emotionally healthy, comfortable and cheerful children. But no matter what you do, your children are still going to feel sad, afraid, anxious, and angry from time to time. Your challenge, as a parent, is to learn how to help your children cope with their feelings and express them in socially acceptable ways that don't harm others and that are appropriate to their age and abilities.

Importance of Trust

The most important factor in fostering mental health in your child is the quality of the relationship you have with her. Without the presence of trust in this relationship, it's impossible for your child to feel safe, close, or comfortable. Trust has its roots in infancy, when babies gain confidence that they can depend on adults around them to meet their basic needs. From your baby's perspective, reasonably prompt and consistent care is an essential ingredient in developing trust. When her needs are responded to, your baby develops trust and confidence, and feels valued and important.

It's also important to maintain that trustful feeling as your child continues to grow. One of the easiest ways to build trust is by maintaining an orderly routine throughout the day so your child can predict what's going to happen next. Consistent rules that your child understands also add to his sense of trust. Adults who maintain their self-control encourage children to trust them. Then children can predict what their responses will be and this breeds confidence in the relationship. It's also important for rules and tasks to be appropriate for the child's age and abilities.

Trust between you and your child's other caregivers is also essential. This connection is important for all children, but especially for children with disabilities.

Choices and Limits

The toddler's drive toward independence and self-assertion is an important stage of emotional development. Maintain limits when necessary and independence when it's possible. Avoid confrontations when you can, insist on doing things your way when necessary, and provide as many choices for your child as possible. There are many choices that you can offer, but they are limited choices: not "do you want to

put on a sweatshirt?" but "which sweatshirt?" not "do you want any vegetables on your plate?" but "do you want carrots or beans?" You can also give your children choices about their play and activities. When children are expected to choose for themselves what they want to do, they have endless opportunities for making decisions.

Older children of 4 or 5 years need to reach out to the world around them, to be a part of and connected to the group. Try to encourage children of this age to think things up and try things out. It's important for them to feel the emotional satisfaction that comes from experiences of exploring, acting and doing new things together with friends.

When children don't have opportunities to make choices, endless struggles result with a spirited child and a loss of self-confidence in less spirited children. But not everything is a choice and sometimes the answer is "no." Learning how to cope with disappointments, delays, and setbacks is also a critical part of developing a healthy, balanced mental attitude. Try to reduce the level and frequency of disappointments and frustrations in order to avoid unnecessary battles.

Feel What You Want, Control What You Do

One of the most valuable skills you can teach your children is how to express strong emotions without hurting themselves, others, or damaging property. Help your children learn to feel what they want, but control what they do. Begin by communicating to your child in a non-judgmental way, showing him you understand how he feels. Encourage your child to say his feelings out loud and to tell the other person how he feels. If the child's too young or inexperienced to know what to say, model a simple sentence for him to copy. The important thing to remember is that the same rule applies to you: feel what you want, but control what you do.

Hallmarks of Emotional Health

Here are some ways that can help you decide if your child is doing all right:

- Is your child working on emotional tasks that are appropriate for her age and ability? For example, if she's two and a half, is she asserting herself from time to time?

- Is your child able to separate from you without undue stress and form an attachment with at least one other adult?
- Is your child learning to conform to routines at school without too much trouble?
- Is your child able to involve himself deeply in play?
- Can your child settle down and concentrate?
- Is your child aware of all her feelings and can she express them without harming herself or others?

Things to Remember

- It is very important for your children to learn how to openly acknowledge their feelings.
- In conflicts, it is vital that your children learn how to describe what they feel like doing, using their words instead of actions.
- Try to really listen to your children. Get down to their level to let them know you are listening. This communicates respect, warmth and empathy. It tells your children they are important.
- Encourage your children to explore, make decisions and attempt challenging projects.
- Children's needs are immediate, intense and personal. The longer you keep your children waiting, the more irritable they become.
- Play is a very important way for children to learn to understand and express their feelings.

Things to Avoid

- Avoid misrepresenting your feelings to your child; for example, saying, "I'm not angry, just worried you'll hurt yourself," when you are really angry!
- Try not to make a lot of demands on a tired or hungry child.
- Avoid name-calling, blaming or yelling. It's better to calm down for a few minutes, think about what you want to say to your child, then simply and calmly say how you are feeling.

Try This at Home

- Notice the types of activities in which your children become engaged. Think of related and challenging activities that you could do with your child. Can you think of any experiments or exploration you could engage in together?
- The next time your child gets into a fight or argument with another child, try to help both children express their negative emotions and say what they feel like doing to the other child, instead of doing it. Give the children the opportunity to find a way to resolve the dispute in-

stead of deciding yourself how they can make amends.

- Work on "active listening" with your child by sitting down and looking at her when she is talking. Pay attention to your reaction. If you find yourself judging what your child says, try to stop yourself and rephrase your comments.
- Set up a pretend school environment at your kitchen table and encourage your child to be one of his teachers or one of his classmates. Ask questions that help your child consider different scenarios or activities that could occur at school and how teachers and children would react. If you have more than one child, encourage them to change roles with each other.

Recommended Books on Emotional Development

- Berkowitz, Leonard. Aggression : Its Causes, Consequences, and Control. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993.
- Brazleton, T.B. Touchpoints: Your Child's Emotional and Behavioral Development. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1992.
- Eisenberg, N. The Caring Child. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992.
- Grollman, Earl A. Talking About Death : A Dialogue Between Parent and Child. Beacon Press, 1991.
- Harris, J.M. You and Your Child's Self-Esteem: Building for the Future. New York: Carroll & Graf, 1989.
- Humphrey, J.H. Teaching Children to Relax. Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas, 1988.
- Kohn, A. Punished by Rewards: The Trouble with Gold Stars, Incentive Plans, A's, Praise, and Other Bribes. Boston, MA: Houghton-Mifflin, 1993.
- Kalter, N. Growing Up with Divorce: Heling Your Child Avoid Immediate and Later Emotional Problems. New York: Free Press, 1990.
- Samalin, N. Love and Anger: The Parental Dilemma. New York: Viking, 1991.
- Zeanah, Charles H. Jr. Handbook of Infant Mental Health. Guilford Press, 1999.

From the Child Care Services Resource Library:

- Gottman, John. Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child. 1997
- Greenspan, Stanley. The Child with Special Needs: Encouraging Intellectual and Emotional Growth. 1998.