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The Emotional Lives of Young Children

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Young children have the unique capacity to display a range of emotions in a matter of minutes. They can go from happy to sad, anxious to frustrated before you finish your morning coffee. They are everything but predictable. Tragically, there are alarming signs we are falling short in helping our children understand their rich, diverse and big emotional worlds. We have escalating rates of anxiety, attention problems, addiction, aggression, and dominance problems in our children today. In fact, the World Health Organization says that anxiety is the biggest mental health issue in children aged 4 to 17 worldwide. In light of these findings, the question we ought to be considering is what is the role of a parent in helping their child understand their feelings? Furthermore, how do we help them learn to share them in a responsible way?

Part of the challenge in making headway is that parents receive diverging opinions from 'experts' on how to 'manage' children's emotions. Some suggest we should ignore a temper tantrum in order to extinguish it while others would argue for supporting the child and helping them find their tears. How can parents find their way with such divergence in the parenting literature? The answer lies in understanding the current findings on emotional health and maturity based on developmental science.



The good news is that young children are some of the easiest people to understand in terms of their emotional states. Their bodies reflect happiness, their feet jump when excited, and they may wave their arms or scream when frustrated. How a young child is feeling is usually on display for everyone to see. The challenge for parents is that emotional expression can be big, intense, loud, messy, chaotic, and come at the most inconvenient times. Why is it that temper tantrums are unleashed in grocery stores or resistance appears when you need to hurry and leave for school? The question on every parent's mind in these moments is *"what do I do when my child is coming undone emotionally?"*

Three Keys to Emotional Health and Maturity

One of the three keys to emotional health and maturity is **expression**. If we are going to help our children learn a language of the heart and be able to share feelings in a responsible way, they need to have a relationship with their emotions. Being able to express one's feelings is critical but we do not share our heart contents with just anyone. Being attached to someone is a prerequisite to learning words for emotional states and the sharing of feelings.

There are many things that interfere with a child's expression of emotion and a lot of them stem from repeated messages to calm down. We often communicate to our kids that they are too upset, too loud, too alarmed or frustrated. There is a myth that if we give them room to express their emotions they will never learn to express themselves differently. What is true is that *if they cannot first express their emotional world as it appears to them, they will never come to form a language around it*. You cannot have a relationship with something you do not understand nor make decisions to act differently without awareness. For example, if we cannot first express we are frustrated, how will we ever find our words for what is frustrating us? Emotional expression must come first because we cannot understand something that isn't welcomed into existence or that we are shamed of. If we are upset, the worst thing someone can say to us is – "don't be upset." When your feelings are negated, countered, or discounted, it will only serve to create additional emotions to have to deal with.



Helping to giving children names for their emotional state and coming alongside their big feelings is key.

When we give them a word to understand what they are feeling we help move their expression from physical forms to verbal forms. Young children are impulsive and ego-centric by nature, it will be up to us to keep other's safe when they are needing to get their big feelings out. We need to help our children express themselves but the challenge is when our children are exhibiting strong feelings it will undoubtedly also activate our own strong feelings. Our own emotional reactions can serve to get in the way of helping them understand their feelings.

The end goal is to help our children share their hearts content in a mature way but before our kids can get there, the building blocks of emotional health and maturity must

be supported by parents. Not only do our children need to express their emotions but also ***feel them in a vulnerable way***. The capacity to feel deeply and to care is one of the oldest and most important feelings in terms of overall health and maturity.

Our children need to feel sad, sacred, frustrated and to not be talked out of these feelings, distracted or prevented from getting there because they make us feel uncomfortable. How can we ever begin to help our children move through their sadness if we are too uncomfortable with their upset? There are many times we want to fix or make things different for them when in fact, it is just a sad part of life. There are birthday parties they don't get invited to, friends that don't want to play, and things that get broken or lost. It is not our job to shield them from these life experiences but to help them go through them in a vulnerable way. We need to help them express their sadness, find words for it, and have tears for what has been lost. This is how we were meant to help them navigate their emotional landscape. We weren't meant to fix their feelings but help them move through them in a vulnerable way. It is this process most of all that builds resilience, confidence, and resourcefulness as they engage in their world fully.

The final key to emotional health and maturity is **self-control** but this unfolds in a healthy child between the years of 5 to 7. If a child experiences their world intensely and shows signs of sensitivity, this may be delayed to 7 to 9 years of age. Their brain needs sufficient development in order to carry two conflicting signals that create tension inside of them. It is this tension – ‘to throw the train or to use their words instead’ – that allows for a more tempered child to emerge. Emotions are strong forces that propel us forward and the only thing that will hold them at bay is another emotion that conflicts with it. Young children are known for being able to only do one thing at a time, one feeling at a time. Self-control over emotional content is a developmental milestone and cannot be hurried or pushed along. Young children need to be given room to express themselves, feel their feelings in a vulnerable way, and be given time to grow the neurological underpinnings that will carry conflicting emotional messages.

Young children do not understand their emotions and need adult assistance in guiding them through this foreign land. There is much we can do to help their emotional health and maturity along and many popular parenting practices are getting in the way of this growth. It starts with helping them express their feelings and culminates with self-control. The problem is that so much of our efforts today push for self-control and emotional restraint. Children need to first understand who they are and have words for the emotions that stir within them. It is only by knowing themselves that they can then start to understand the world of others. Responsible sharing and self control around emotional content is the fruit that comes with growth and maturity. When it comes to young children it starts with allowing those big feelings to come out, helping them find names for their emotions, and experiencing them in a vulnerable way.

Copyright Deborah MacNamara, PhD, Kid’s Best Bet – *Dr. Deborah MacNamara is a counsellor in private practice and on faculty at the Neufeld Institute. She works with parents, educators, child-care and mental health professionals in making sense of kids from the inside out. See www.macnamara.ca or www.neufeldinstitute.com for more information.*

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