

Gardeners at Heart: Growing Emotional Health in our Children

by Hannah Beach and Tamara Strijack (February 17, 2020)

Health is something we all desire for our children. Physical health is straightforward to assess, as problems usually show up in terms of pain and discomfort. Emotional health, however, is a bit trickier to measure; how do we even know what to look for?

Consider this story from Tamara ...

I had a weeping fig that was not thriving when it was transitioned from the nursery to my home; in fact, it wasn't thriving in the nursery either, and so I knew there might be challenges. But I was excited about my new plant and I didn't let the bit of wilting deter me. When it arrived, I placed it where I wanted it to be, so that I might enjoy its presence and it could keep me company while I worked. However, the fig plant was not so happy where it was. It let me know by shedding leaves – lots of them. At first I tried to change how much I watered it, but it didn't make a difference. And so, I realized that something else must be going on. I moved it to a window, closer to the sun and to its tree relatives outside. It stopped shedding leaves within a day. I had found the right conditions! I had to deal with my own frustration and disappointment, as this was not my plan for where I wanted the fig, but it was what the fig plant needed. In this process, I had to adapt and be flexible — I had to read the signs. I was the gardener, the one tending the plant, and it was up to me to find the conditions that my plant needed to reach its potential, and do my part to help it get there.

With a plant, it seems obvious that when we see it struggling, we should try to change the conditions. Does it need more or less water? Does it have enough sun? Does it need extra care now because we were away for a few weeks? Is it a delicate plant that needs just the right situation to thrive?

The process is similar with children. Kids are not likely to shed leaves, but something in their behaviour can alert us to the fact that something is not right. Their behaviour is a little window in to their internal world, and we can use it as an indicator of emotional health. If we pay attention, our children's behaviour shows us when something is not working for a child (of course it can also show us when something is working for a child). When we can find the conditions that work for a child, they have the opportunity to thrive in the same way as the weeping fig did.

In fact, we could even say that a child's behaviour is a gift (though it might not always feel that way!) that provides us with valuable information that can be incredibly helpful to us, even when that behaviour is troubling. When we remember that a child's behaviour is telling us something, it changes the dance. It helps us to explore what the child needs so that they can grow.

Just like the plant couldn't be taught to hold on to its leaves, trying to teach a child a lesson or getting mad at a child whose behaviour is off, isn't going to get to the root of the problem. In fact, it may even make things worse. Instead, what if we were to try and remember that, just like a plant, what we see on the outside is telling us something about what is happening on the inside?

But how do we know what they need?! Each person is unique of course, but we all share universal needs:

- We all need connection.
- We all need room to express ourselves.
- And we all need a safe space to feel our emotions.

In our experience, the most challenging behaviours in children stem from one of these needs not being met. If we start with these universal needs, we can explore what a child needs more or less of. All healthy emotional growth in children starts with a safe relationship with a caring adult, and providing them with a safe space to feel.

So how do we help our children find their feelings?

It starts with relationship. We, the adults in charge, need to help our kids find their feelings in the most human way possible. This starts with building positive relationships with the children we work with every day. Whether we are a parent, teacher, social worker, or a helping professional, research now clearly shows that a safe emotional connection with a caring adult is the best way to protect our children's hearts. One strong, trusting relationship with a caring adult has the power to positively impact a child's emotional health and well-being forever. When children feel deeply cared for, this supports them to develop their own caring feelings which makes them naturally more sensitive to the emotional needs of others.

This might sound incredibly simple, or even obvious. It might also sound "soft," or "too easy" to be true. It is anything but that. Unfortunately, the ways that we deal with troubling child and youth behaviours today – through systems of rewards and punishment, or by trying to be "friends" with children and have them see us as their peers – are not helping. Sometimes they even exacerbate the problem, because they alienate us from the very children that we are trying to support.

Instead, we have to find our way back into relationships with the children in our care that make them feel safe with us, so they may be open to our guidance. **We need to be their safe place**, the place where they feel safe enough to let down the wall around their hearts. And once we do that, we have an opportunity to make meaningful change in their lives.

And, our feelings need to play. Just as important as building strong relationships with children is providing them with opportunities in which their feelings can come out to play. In other words, we need to provide them with emotional playgrounds. And in our experience, the most powerful emotional playgrounds of all are the arts – but not in the way that most of us think of them.

From the very beginning of time—as we drew on cave walls, danced around fires, shared stories, sang songs, and sculpted clay—adults and children alike have been expressing themselves through the arts. Cultures are created over time, holding the wisdom of what is needed to sustain the emotional health of individuals and communities. The fact that every traditional culture has developed rituals of singing, sharing stories, and dancing together is not a coincidence. These art forms have served as expressive outlets that bring people together to release what needs to be released and to share in the collective reflection of what it means to be human. Simply put, they bring us to our feelings, and to the feelings of one another. And these experiences are essential to healthy emotional development.

The profound impact of the arts on the emotional health and well-being of our children and broader communities is now coming back to our attention through a global paradigm shift. Where once the arts were seen as “extras” in curricula and community programs, researchers and experts in emotional health are beginning to understand the extraordinary power of the arts to awaken feeling, support emotional growth, and in doing so, connect us to one another. This might feel like a surprising revelation today – but if we consider historical cultural practices over thousands of years, we begin to see that artistic rituals and practices that have been woven into our lives are integral to healthy human development.

Human beings have a deep need to express what is inside of us so that we may become known and make visible to others our inner worlds. This expression helps us make sense of who we are and to bring us into the world of another. Artistic experiences are where we can truly *feel our emotions* in unparalleled ways. We listen to music that moves us, or watch great films that bring us catharsis. We share stories that take us on journeys of emotion —sadness, joy, loss, pain, and hope—offering glimpses into the experiences of others and of what it means to be fully human.

When artistic experiences are about process, rather than outcome, they can become playgrounds for our feelings. When we offer children opportunities for artistic expression in ways that are truly *playful* and that are held by the safety

of our relationship – i.e. in ways that don't make them feel pressure to create something "good" or "perfect," but simply to be who they are and share that with us and others – we support their healthy emotional development. And when they feel connected to us through a strong relationship and we become their compass point, that is when these experiences will result in the most profound changes. The emotional health that emerges is the fruit of relationship and play – and as such, it is profound and long-lasting.

So, coming back to our wilted plant ...

When we face challenging behaviours, we could start by just asking ourselves simple questions that can help us to discover what is needed.

- Does this child need more connection time?
- Do they feel special and important to at least one caring adult in their lives?
- Do they have the space needed to express and digest big emotions?
- Do they need more opportunity for expression and release through play?
- Do they have a safe space to feel their very tender feelings?
- Are their days structured so tightly that they don't have enough quiet, gentle moments of nothingness in which their feelings can surface?

By asking questions like these, we draw closer to being able to create the conditions needed for our children's emotional health and growth. **We become gardeners at heart.**

To be a gardener is to be curious about what a plant needs, to see what is working and what isn't, and to attempt to provide for the needs as best as we can. We have both, in our own ways and in our own timing, found our way to becoming gardeners, with plants and with children.

Neither of us are perfect gardeners by any means. But what we do know and trust is that just like plants, every human being is born with huge potential and given the right conditions, will thrive. As caretakers of children's hearts, we need to hold on to this knowledge, so that we don't give up on those who are slower to grow or have experienced adverse conditions that have affected their development. Lasting change takes time.

Dr. Gordon Neufeld, 2017
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