

How to Use: Real Stuff for Real People

Children (as well as adults) can get flooded with emotions. When a child is in the middle of an intense emotion, it is sometimes difficult for him or her to stop and cognitively process and talk about the emotion. But the very act of talking about an emotion can help a child begin to manage that emotion. Additionally, as discussed above, this enlists a different part of the brain to help the child deal with the emotion.

So what can an adult do to help a child stuck in an emotional state? A beginning step is to identify for the child the feeling of being overwhelmed. You could say, "You're having that 'it's too much' feeling." Or you could even say, "You're feeling AAAAHHHGGG [frustrated]."

Many adults are afraid that if they match the child's level of emotional intensity when identifying the child's feeling, the emotion will spin out of control. Actually, the opposite is usually true. There is something calming and reassuring about another person really understanding your experience. After identifying the emotion, you can say, "Name three things that will help." Or, following the above idea of expressing the child's emotion with an expressive sound, you can say, "What can we do to get to aaaaahhhhhh [calm and content]?" Most of us become so distressed by a child's strong emotions that we jump right into problem-solving or "fixing" the feeling. Communicating that you understand or "feel" the feeling is one of the most powerful yet least used parenting skills.

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Our Mission

We awaken and uncover the inherent wellness in children and parents through sharing relevant strategies, information, and skills, empowering all to nurture healthy relationships. We value each child and believe each family is worthy of our best efforts.

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Emotions and Emotional Development

By Cinda Morgan, LCSW

The Science of Emotion

Our brains are hardwired to have emotions. An infant cries when his mother leaves the room and smiles when she returns. A five-year-old is worried about the first day of kindergarten. A teenager is exuberant when she makes the team. A 90-year-old is melancholy after the death of his spouse. Everyone has emotions, whether big or small, every day.

Even though we all have emotions, our particular emotional responses are shaped by our individual experiences and personalities. But emotions are not just something created by our culture or environment. Research has shown that they are part of our biological makeup.^{1, 2, 3}

Fear, surprise, anger, disgust, sadness and anguish, and happiness have been identified by researchers as innate emotions.^{4, 5, 6, 7} This list came as the result of Paul Ekman's research with the Fore tribes of Papua New Guinea.⁸ Even members of this remote, stone-age culture could identify these primary emotions from photographs of

people from unfamiliar cultures. Some emotions are universal. Different emotions stimulate unique regions of the brain, which can be identified by neurobiological imaging.⁹

Understanding Levels of Emotional Development

Parents and professionals who work with children are generally less interested in the "what" of emotions and more interested in the "how to" of managing emotions. Although there are many theories of emotional development, one useful approach outlines five components or levels. These levels are believed to be hierarchical—in other words, each level builds on the previous one.^{10, 11, 12}

1. Emotional Self-Awareness: This is the ability to recognize appropriate body cues and emotions and to label these emotions accurately. In this stage, it is not enough to just feel the emotion; one must be able to identify it. Part of the identification process involves understanding and recognizing multiple (and some-

times opposing) emotions. Children can understand this concept of multiple emotions through the illustration of a double-scoop ice cream cone. You can have a scoop of strawberry ice cream and a scoop of chocolate ice cream in the same cone. In the same way, you can feel both sad and frustrated when your best friend can't come over and play.

Scientists still believe that many of our emotional responses stem from the limbic system of the brain. It has also been shown that the limbic system is involved in recognizing emotional expressions on faces and in storing emotional memories. When a person identifies and describes an emotion, the frontal lobe, or the logical and information-processing part of the brain, is utilized. Firing up this portion of the brain is a necessary precursor to effectively manage emotions, because the frontal lobe is used in the next level of emotional development and all levels hereafter. In fact, the frontal lobe has been called the "emotional manager" because it seems to play a vital role in overriding emotional impulses.⁹

2. Managing One's Own Emotions: Many scientists believe that we humans have little control over the occurrence and intensity of our emotions.¹³

However, it is also believed that the individual can determine how long he or she will experience unpleasant emotions and what behaviors, if any, will result from the emotion. So you may not choose to have an emotion, but you can choose how long you'll have it and what you'll do about it.

The key to successfully coping with unpleasant emotions is to use multiple coping techniques. These coping skills might include external techniques such as talking to someone or distracting yourself, or internal techniques such as telling yourself that your friend still likes you but she is just having a bad day. Another component of managing emotions involves understanding what is behind a feeling. For example, it is important for someone who is easily angered to understand that hurt or fear often triggers anger. Managing emotions also includes taking responsibility for decisions and actions. For example, "I was really angry" does not become an excuse for poor or uncontrolled behavior.

3. Using Emotions for Intellectual Processing: For years it was thought that emotions disrupted rational thought. But recent research has shown that emotions can improve thinking by directing a person's atten-

tion to important changes. Emotions help you select an optimal decision.^{14, 15} Without emotions, prioritizing tasks becomes virtually impossible. Have you ever tried to figure out what movie to see or what restaurant to go to when no one in the group really cares or has a strong emotion about where to go? This simple example demonstrates the need for harnessing emotions in effective decision making.

4. Developing Empathy: This level involves understanding others' feelings and taking into account their perspective. Compassion is a word that is used in connection with empathy. Empathy encompasses the ability to respect differences in how other people feel about things. Research has shown that empathy is a key aspect of decreasing violence and has been successfully taught as part of school violence-prevention programs.¹⁶

One aspect of this level of emotional development that may not be readily apparent is the ability to accurately read the emotional states of others. It has been found that bullies often misread facial expressions.¹⁷ There is also some interesting preliminary research which shows that teenagers often misread adults' facial expressions.¹⁸ This should encourage adults to take extra

care when communicating with teenagers.

5. The Art of Social Relationships: This level includes the ability to guide an interaction, to inspire others, and to make others comfortable in social situations. This highest level of emotional development also involves learning and using skills that establish and maintain healthy relationships, such as listening, cooperation, conflict resolution, and negotiating compromises.

Building on the Basics

Many adults become upset, worried, or embarrassed when children do not appropriately manage emotions. But based on this approach to emotional development, a better starting point might be to ask, "Does she recognize her feelings?" "Can he discuss and talk about how he is feeling and why?" "Does she understand a link between thoughts, feelings, and reactions?" These are all elements of the first level of emotional development, and managing emotions grows out of these abilities. Just like any skill, these levels or components can be taught and learned. As we understand the roots of emotion and the process of emotional development, we can improve our everyday encounters with our emotions and those of others.