

Precocious Boys Need Help Dealing With Emotions

by Paula Prober

“I worry about my son. He’s only 7 years old but I already see him hiding his feelings. He used to be so emotional. He would cry easily, even when other children got hurt on the playground. Of course, then I worried that he was too emotional, that kids would tease him because he was so sensitive. I don’t understand. He seems so bright. He was reading when he was 4. His vocabulary is enormous. He’s always full of questions about stuff I didn’t know existed when I was his age. So how can he be so smart and so emotionally immature?”

If this sounds like you describing your son, you’re not alone. Many parents of precocious boys express similar concerns. Even in the seemingly progressive ‘90s, we still get nervous when our sons show us their fear, glee, shame, or despair. And we teach them with our subtle and not-so-subtle messages that feelings are female and “real boys” don’t go there.

What parents don’t know is that precocious children are usually more emotionally expressive than their peers. When a child is intellectually advanced, he often has matching levels of perception and sensitivities. This means that not only can he think in more complex ways and process information at a faster rate, but he is also more aware of and sensitive to his environment.

This would be the child who, for example, can’t sleep because of his anxiety over global warming, or who grieves when the trees in his neighborhood are cut down, or who is overwhelmed by the noise at the birthday party and offended by the “childishness” of the other 4-year-olds. Often, these boys cry as a way to express and release their pain, fear, and compassion. Parents and others can misinterpret this as emotional immaturity.

How do we support these boys in developing and appreciating their rich and varied emotions?

- **Be authentic.** Your child will be able to sense your discomfort or impatience. If you try to pretend you’re accepting of all feelings, but you really get irritated by “victims” and “wimps,” he’ll know it. Examine your own biases, fears of being too needy, and early messages about emotion. Ask your son to help you understand his world and then listen closely. Tell him what you think he said and ask if it’s correct. Your honesty and vulnerability will build trust and a safe place for him to be real. Even if he has to learn to control, contain, and conceal some of his feelings out in the world, he’ll know he can show you his many dimensions.
- **Teach him ways to soothe himself.** This can include simple techniques he can use at school or during activities, or more complex remedies that the whole family can practice. Possibilities include: breathing deeply, visualizing a color that he finds calming and feeling it flowing through his body, imagining an animal by his side that is a loving protector, singing a song to himself, planning a time for the family when members share stories of difficult experiences and how they got through them, writing or drawing in a journal, engaging in a form of exercise that relieves tension, or using his connection to nature to create a sense of peace and safety.

- **Supply him with specific words** to describe the feelings of disappointment, grief, or embarrassment, for example.
- **Discuss** why some people are uncomfortable with emotion.
- **Role play** various ways to handle emotions in public.
- **Provide consistent and reliable limits.** Even though your son needs your empathy, he also needs you to say “no” when necessary. He may act as though he wants to be in charge and may argue his case like a pro, but he needs the security of clear boundaries.
- **Tell him that he doesn’t have to know everything** (neither do you, by the way) and that some things take time to learn. Give examples from your own life. Tell him that his mind may think up things that his body isn’t able to do yet, and even though that’s terribly frustrating, it doesn’t mean he’s not intelligent.
- **Help him find friends** who have similar intellectual needs and sensitivities.
- **Read** Pollack’s “Real Boys” and Garbarino’s “Lost Boys: Why Our Sons Turn Violent and How We Can Save Them.”
- **Remind other parents** that all of our children need us to welcome their fears, passions, joys, and sorrows.

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