

Second That Emotion

by Charlotte Peterson

Feelings are universal the world over. All people want to feel [safe](#), [loved](#), listened to, and respected. Often, however, even the most well-meaning adults will invalidate children's feelings or thwart the expression of those feelings. When this occurs, children feel hurt, shamed, embarrassed, and confused. Children may even begin to feel that there is something wrong with them as if they're somehow broken inside or different from other people because of their feelings.

Why does this occur? The most likely reason is because the adults were taught in childhood not to let their own feelings show. Many adults have a difficult time expressing feelings. Some have forgotten how to cry, many are afraid to let anyone know they are scared, and most don't know [how to get anger out](#) without hurting either themselves or someone else. Some people have learned to hide feelings so well, that they can successfully hide their feelings from even themselves.

Feelings are too important to ignore. They are our emotional fingerprints. They tell us what brings us pleasure and pain, what makes us feel safe, and what makes us feel scared. Pay attention to your feelings, and you pay attention to yourself. Understand your child's emotions, and you understand your child.

As a psychologist who has worked with families for over 30 years, I've seen what happens when children mask their feelings because they fear punishment or a parent's disapproval. A child's hidden feelings don't go away. In fact, they often get expressed indirectly, in ways nobody likes. An angry child may "pick on" his younger brother. A sad child may become a constant whiner who does nothing but watch TV.

When you help your children handle their feelings constructively, there are wide-ranging benefits, a recent study at the University of Washington in Seattle has revealed. Children who learn emotional self-awareness and [self-control](#) score higher on math and reading achievement tests. They also have longer attention spans, fewer behavior problems, lower stress levels, and lower heart rates.

Even if you were raised to ignore your own emotions, you can unlearn what you were taught years ago. You can teach your children to listen to their feelings, even as you reconnect with your own.

The Emotional Quartet

We are all born knowing how to express four basic feelings. They are:

Glad—With a smile or a giggle, your children let you know how happy they are to be cuddling in your lap or tumbling around the lawn with their puppy. Most parents welcome this emotion, unless their child gets overly noisy and rambunctious in the process.

Mad—children might express this emotion by yelling, biting, spitting, or clenching their teeth; hitting, throwing, ripping, kicking, stomping, or punching. If you were taught as a

child to repress your anger, you may view your children's anger as inappropriate. Or, you may feel helpless about how to help them because you became confused about how to handle this emotion when you were little.

Sad—Younger children of both genders show this emotion by moping, whining, and especially, by crying. Tears are very effective in evoking a parent's sympathy, but they can also evoke discomfort—"How come I can't make my child happy?" or even a feeling of being manipulated—"I just sit down to dinner and the baby starts to cry?" Parents of boys may be especially harsh about enforcing a "no tears" policy. Perhaps this is why many males have difficulty expressing sadness and often express it as anger.

Scared—Trembling, sweating, and withdrawing are a few ways that children react to [life's scary situations](#). Some children are born with a more timid nature, but in a world like ours, all children see and hear things that frighten them. Some parents hate seeing their children—and boys in particular—shrink from what scares them. Perhaps in their childhood they were chastised for not being brave. Or perhaps they think that by bullying children out of their anxieties, they can make them more independent. But in reality, denying a child a night-light only creates a bigger fear of the dark.

Your Six-Step Action Plan

There are much better ways to deal with your child's emotions than by denying or dismissing them. Here is a positive six-step plan.

1. Review your own emotional upbringing. How did your parents react when you were mad, sad, glad, or scared? How did their response make you feel? How would you have wanted them to respond? The answers to these questions can help you change the way you respond to your child's feelings. Remember, other parents have made changes by learning the approaches described in this article. You can, too.

2. Get as early a start as possible on validating your children's feelings. Even before your children can talk, they'll absorb your acceptance of their emotions in the way you look at them, hold them, and "hang in there" with their mercurial moods. Your abiding presence tells your children that they can trust in you and eventually, in others, to respond to their needs. Granted, it's not as easy to be content with a cross and cranky baby as a smiling, sunny one. But when you're open to, and accepting of, the full range of your children's emotions, from [sad](#) to glad, you take a giant step toward recognizing your children's uniqueness and loving them for who they are. You also help your children to accept themselves and to build their self-esteem.

3. Second that emotion. Just as you name objects and show your children what to do with them—"This is a ball, see how it bounces?"—so should you name and explain their feelings. For example, if your children shrink from a big insect, you might say, "I see you're scared of that bug" and then "second" their emotion: "I remember when I was your age, I got scared when a bumblebee flew into my playhouse." Your children will be enormously relieved to know that they are not alone in how they feel, and that you understand because you've "been there." If, on the other hand, you're having trouble deciphering your children's emotion, try saying something open-ended and accepting like, "Would you like to sit in my lap for a minute?"

4. Be careful not to diminish how your children are feeling. If your child is moping around the house, for example, you might be tempted to say something dismissive like, “Cheer up, honey, it’s a beautiful day. Go ride your bike.” The trouble with this approach is that it doesn’t teach your child anything about how to [cope with sadness](#). That’s where emotional coaching from you becomes important.

5. Be your children’s emotional coach. This may sound intimidating, but it’s actually fairly simple. First, try to help your children [understand](#) what’s at the root of their feeling. Children don’t analyze their emotions; they just feel them, so it’s usually not helpful to ask children why they are feeling a certain way. But you can [validate](#) the feelings you observe: “Wow, you look mad to me?” You can also add your insights: “It must seem to you like I’m always with the new baby. Did you feel mad when I picked your brother up just now?” And finally, help them think of what they can do next: “You can’t hit the baby, but it’s good to get the ‘mad out’ without hurting anyone.” Then show them some acceptable ways to do that. Your children will usually express with their hands by hitting, with their feet by kicking or their voice by yelling. Help them channel that natural response by suggesting good ways to get that anger out using their hands, feet or voice. For example, tell them it is okay with their hands to pound on a bed or rip up some newspapers, with their feet they could kick a ball or stomp on some egg cartons, or with their voice they could make loud sounds that help get their anger out.

6. Give your children a continuing emotional education. Together, read some emotionally uplifting children’s books. Make a “feelings chart” by cutting out faces in magazines, pasting them on paper, and then working with your child on labeling each one as “mad,” “sad,” “glad,” or “scared.” Activities like these tell your children that feelings are important.

World-Wise Feelings Watch

Some cultures are particularly good at helping kids deal with their feelings. Here are some examples, and what you can learn from them.

- **Bali** - Parents view their responsibility as not controlling children’s actions, but helping children listen to how they feel when they act a certain way.
- **Botswana** - Babies are carried 80 percent of the time so parents are in constant touch with how their children are feeling.
- **Fiji** - Parents delight in the way their children express feelings so freely. They strive to be as emotionally open as their children.
- **South America** - Babies are always comforted when they cry, as well as fed when they are hungry.
- **Thailand** - Childlike behavior is adored. Adults attempt to remain as playful and enthusiastic as children.

Best and Worst Response to Your Child’s Emotions

Do any of the statements below sound familiar? In your day-to-day dealings with your children, work on phasing out any rejecting responses as you phase in more of the accepting ones. Acceptance helps to make your children feel safe, listened to, and loved.

Rejecting

Accepting

MAD

Don't talk to me that way!
I don't want to hear about it!
Get that look off your face!
You're such a bad girl/boy!
Control yourself!

Looks like you've really had a hard day!
Boy, do you look mad!
It's okay to be mad, but it's not okay to hurt someone else.
Here are some good ways to get the "mad" out.

SAD

You are too sensitive.
You're acting like a baby.
There's nothing to be sad about.
Turn off those tears this minute!

Sure looks like you're feeling down.
Everyone feels like crying sometimes.
Crying is a good way to get the "sad" out.
I'm glad you're having a good cry.

SCARED

There's nothing to be afraid of!
It's not that scary!
Don't be such a wimp!
Grow up!

Aren't things scary sometimes?
I don't like scary movies, either.
I used to be afraid of dogs, too.
I'll help scare those monsters away!

ALL FEELINGS

You shouldn't feel that way!
That's unacceptable!
Don't be like that!
I am ashamed of you!
You're being ridiculous!

Isn't life hard sometimes?
Some days I feel that way, too.
Is there anything I can do to help?
How can I help you feel better?
Sure looks like you could use a hug.

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