

How can families support children manage their emotions?

Emotions are core to human experience and fundamental to the development of mental fitness and prosocial development from birth to adulthood. They play a significant role in the development of coping and optimising life's journeys, yet they remain intangible and elusive due to the impact they have on our physiology, given they are invisible and only identifiable through behaviour or expression.

We can't see the emotions in our body but we can certainly feel them, especially when they present themselves strongly. They can cause serious disruption to a calm state, they can interfere with being serene, they can be painfully spiking when we can't gain control, and they can be hurtful when we least expect it. For children, as for some adults, this can be an overwhelming experience which causes considerable discomfort, that we don't want to experience that again. Our minds link the experience of the emotion to the event which caused the emotion; logically we avoid the emotion by avoiding any re-experiencing of that event. Welcome to avoidance behaviour.

When children experience pleasant and favourable emotions, they experience safety which invites exploration and engagement toward their environments. Welcome to approach behaviours. This often looks like "happiness", and it makes us also feel valued and competent. Happiness becomes the preferred emotional state for obvious reasons, like minimal [or absence of] discomfort, a sense of control and sense of strong, supportive connections. It becomes displeasing when this stability is challenged due to the experiences of stress in the body. We tend to ignore those feelings that present themselves quietly or softly because our bodies don't hurt when levels of emotion are low.



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Strong and overwhelming emotions like anger or humiliation or embarrassment, are emotional consequences of neurochemical changes in the brain and then body. Children's perceptions of trespass, threat or harm trigger a stress response in the brain through the HPA axis [hypothalamus, pituitary, adrenal line of hormonal response] and stress hormones are released in the body, causing symptoms like:

- Tight chest
- Nausea
- Hyperventilation or difficulty breathing
- Jittery legs
- Dry throat and mouth
- Confusion or dizziness
- Frequent toileting
- Tantrums
- Racing heart
- Hot flushes

Emotions are simply data - they are information that represents an internalised state of experiences, which we use to help us understand our interaction with our environment.

It's not the emotions themselves that are scary, it's the physiological experiences which are then described as the emotion.

Because the feelings are so strong and so overwhelming, children simply act out the emotion...they are compelled to behave into that emotion, so that the information is processed.

Sometimes the symptoms of unpleasant emotions are not so extreme, but rather feel like a pervasive uneasiness that is experienced like nervous energy, but is nevertheless just as disruptive because like the very strong emotions, it disrupts our ability to feel safe and in control.

Every emotion has a purpose, a message, something to communicate - as parents we tend to ignore the feelings and focus on the behaviour, because that is what takes our attention



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Managing strong unpleasant emotions is NOT about whether an emotion is appropriate or permissible:

"You shouldn't be so angry that your brother hit you, it was an accident"

but instead about the appropriateness of the behavioural expression which is linked to that emotion:

"I can see you are angry that you have been hit, that is understandable, it hurts to be hit. This was an accident and can happen when you are both playing with lots of energy. Tell your brother how it felt and he can give you a cuddle. You can also give him a cuddle if he accidentally hurts you too"

Parent Rule #1:

Pay attention to the emotion and then respond to the behaviour.

Ask your child to name the emotion first, and if they cannot, then help them find an appropriate label for how they are feeling.

Do not ever punish an emotion or the presence of an emotion, simply say the emotion you see in your child. Your task is to support and improve the development of functional behaviours - ones that promote kindness, patience and optimism.

A wonderful way to support children manage their emotions is by using an abundance of emotional words at home. When you talk about your day in your family space, describe how you felt at different times of the day, both pleasant and unpleasant, so your children can see that emotions are not good or bad, positive or negative, they are simply feelings that helps us add deeper meaning and understanding to how we make choices and cope with daily life. You teach emotional literacy in action!

A resource to which I often refer is the Gloria Wilcox Wheel of Emotions:

[https://www.google.com.au/search?](https://www.google.com.au/search?q=Gloria+Wilcox+Wheel+of+Emotions&rlz=1C5CHFA_enAU611AU611&tbm=isch&imgil=Qu9PKftR404U2M%253A%253B2ucWFXDmAI29mM%253Bhttps%25253A%25252F%25252Fwww.pinterest.com%25252Fpin%25252F533676624571669744%25252F&source=iu&pf=m&fir=Qu9PKftR404U2M%253A%252C2ucWFXDmAI29mM%252C_&usg=__AnEia2vFQhSxt-218jRbEXOffx0%3D&biw=1369&bih=732&ved=0ahUKewiqg4T24Z_WAhUDw7wKHfnABPgQyjciWQ&ei=sOK3WarrG4QG8wX5gZPADw#imgsrc=Qu9PKftR404U2M:)

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There are so many reliable and creative strategies that are available through the BeYou website and other reliable sites. The importance is to know that holding hard emotions without acknowledgement and without validation come at a cost; the cost is developing a pattern of difficult behaviours and risk factors for mental ill-health due to accumulating stress levels in the body.

Parent Rule #2:

Teach children to release their emotions safely:

- Use slow, calm in-breath that expand the lungs and regulate a slow out-breath to release
- Take a little run or kick a ball or go up and down stairs or star jumps - this helps use up the stress hormones so that the body does not have to hold them
- Stretch your body out in all different directions - hold and stretch further
- Squeeze a pillow, a ball, a soft toy, play dough, a bean bag

How might support differ at different stages of development? [babies to toddler to pre-school to primary]

Providing emotional support will differ depending on their age and stage of development. The greatest difference will be the presence of language; the greatest similarity will be the presence of calm.

Babies:

From birth to 10 months there are significant new neurons and connections forming in the baby's brain. It is a time where attachment is very rich and emotions play a crucial role in communication, soothing and protection of the baby and it's healthy development. The support from primary care-givers during this period should focus on creating and managing calming feelings around the baby. For example, gentle tones, smiling faces, an abundance of eye contact, and modelling lots of pleasant feelings like joy, peacefulness, contentment, pride, awe, surprise and love. Of course there are many more, however, the task for the parent is to activate these emotions as much as possible and express them through touch and sound and song. When parents "act out" these feelings with their babies, strong protective factors are formed for the infant like safety, control and resilience.



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Toddlers:

The positive emotions referred to above now requires a more complex support response which involves the introduction of language. Your toddler will benefit from all the emotions referred to above with labels to help them understand the world of emotional literacy. Using exaggerated facial expressions during your interactions and matching them with the feeling words as you model the micro expressions. During this period, picture books that show clear emotions and referring those emotions back to them is another important strategy to improve their understanding that feelings are an important part of life.

Pre-School:

This support is further strengthened where parents activate high level emotional literacy, the expression of varied and more complex feeling words; like, amazed, insecure, excited, trusting, startled, curious, unsure, etc. Sentence starters are necessary here - it's not just naming the emotion, but owning it. For parents to model the language that comes with the experience:

- I feel pleased that we grew our own carrots
- I feel grumpy that my parcel arrived late
- I feel curious about the next book
- I am feeling unsure about going out as it looks like it might rain
- I am feeling overwhelmed with all the phone calls today
- I am feeling confident that the muffins will be eaten at the party

When parents are helping their child identify and manage their emotions, avoid telling them what or how they think their child feels - instead observe the behaviours and ask your child to confirm or correct that feeling:

DO NOT say - "you are angry and you need to stop screaming"

DO SAY - "it looks like you are angry, is that right? Strong emotions can really take over our bodies. I can stay calm with you until you can find your words"

DO NOT say - "you are so unsure of yourself, just make a decision and choose an ice-cream flavour"

DO SAY - "it seems like you feel unsure about what flavour you might like to choose, is that what's happening? Lots of choices can be confusing, think about the best 3, and choose one from them. Let me know if you need me to help you."



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DO NOT say - “you are having a grumpy day and are not putting any of your toys away”

DO SAY - “are you feeling grumpy at the moment? You are frowning so I’m wondering what you are thinking about? I can help you find your words, if you like? Let’s tidy up and we can do some drawings together?”

- Talk emotions
- Feel emotions
- Name emotions
- Breathe into emotions
- Understand emotions
- Growth is possible when there is respectful dialogue through the attention given to children’s “feeling experiences” - Dr Daniel Siegel calls this, “The Felt Experience” - when a parent connects so authentically with the child’s emotion, that the child has an inherent experience of knowing that the parent knows how they feel
- All this takes great practice

Primary School:

This next level of support will require parents to do all of the above, but begin to manage the unhelpful thinking which normally precedes strong emotions. Children now are proficient at telling you why they are upset, what caused it and can advocate for protection or punishment - this can create power dynamics which may not be obvious at the time, but patterns of responses are being formed:

- **Maya:** “dad, Joud ate the last biscuit and that was meant to be mine. She poked her tongue out and said there were none left. She always does this to me. I hate her”.
Joud pushes Maya.
- **Parent:** “Joud, you do not push your sister, and next time you will not eat the last biscuit. Go to your room”. *Joud yells and goes into the bathroom and locks the door.*

This is reactive and focusses primarily on negative behaviours. It runs the risk of valuing negative or unhelpful attention. There is no room for emotions, so children remain unsupported in their attempts to manage such strong feelings and challenging events.



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- **Alternative parent response:** “OK girls, it looks like this is an issue about sharing. Dad asks both girls - What has happened? How do you feel? How do you think your sister felt? Why? What needs to happen now?”
- **This is parenting via positive inquiry** - we allow room for conversation and room for their voices to be heard. Allow them to lead the reconciliation through empathy - hearing how the other person felt about the way they were treated and why. Of course, parent guidance is always required to direct the course of the conversations, however, it's allowing emotions to be expressed and assertive language to develop.

Parallel Processing is when you own and take responsibility or collude with the emotions of your child. This is a common psychological phenomenon where the emotions are so strong and so uncomfortable, that you feel your child's discomfort quickly and deeply, so much so that it makes it very unpleasant for you too. So in order to ameliorate its impact, you take control of the situation in order to remove the unpleasant feelings.

For example, your child is trying to open a lolly bag, but is finding it very hard and is getting impatient as she makes noises, huffs and is scrunching the packet with her fingers appearing to be clumsy as she whines into a growl. You take the packet off her and open it yourself. The underlying rule being taught is that emotional discomfort should be avoided and access to immediate pleasant emotion is the goal.

Parent Rule #3:

Only own YOUR emotions and NOT those of your children:

- It is normal and important for parents to “feel” their children's emotions. When their child is frustrated, parents also feel that frustration just as deeply as that of their child's. This is important, as we call this empathy, and it is the greatest protective factor that we can teach our children.
- However, it is common but unhelpful when parents take on [own] their children's emotions, and they they [parents] begin to act them out.



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Parallel Presence

Parallel Presence with your child by being:

- **Confident and Calm**
- **Observing and Validating**
- **Slow-Down and Tone-Down**
- **Model rhythmic and poised breathing**

Instead of Parallel Processing, we encourage Parallel Presence; being present by remaining in their space with authority of your own emotions. This means when your child up-regulates, you stay present and model how to down-regulate. In Parallel Presence you are confident and calm, you observe and validate, and you slow-down and tone-down.

Don't personalise your child's emotions because it's not about you, it's about them; they are trying to learn how to self-soothe and self-regulate.

Parallel Presence is a fundamental strategy that is applied throughout the lifespan and embodies the core need to regulate the mind and body back to a functional state where strong coping mechanisms can be developed.

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