

Teaching your children to talk about their feelings

OTHER TITLES

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Teaching your children to talk about their feelings

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WHAT IS SO IMPORTANT ABOUT FEELINGS?

If you're like most parents, you sometimes worry about how your child will handle the whole process of growing up. You may wonder if there is anything you can do now that will help your child make safe choices as a teenager. The answer is—yes. Listen to your child, and encourage them to talk about feelings.

Young children are trusting and open. They let you know exactly how they feel without even thinking about it. But even before they reach school age, many children have learned to hide their true feelings. They pick up signals from their parents and other adults, and sense that there are certain things they shouldn't talk about, and certain feelings they should keep to themselves.

As adults we aren't always comfortable talking to our young children about feelings, especially feelings of fear, insecurity, anger, jealousy and loneliness. We may respond with words that aren't very helpful like, "You shouldn't feel that way" or, "There's no reason to be afraid."

By the time children reach the preteen or teenage years, they may have learned that we don't really want to hear about their feelings. They may become guarded and withdrawn, willing to confide in their friends, but not in their parents or caregivers. They may make poor choices as they try to copy the way other teenagers look and behave. Teenagers often feel isolated, and believe that their peers are the only ones who really understand them.

When you take time to listen, and encourage your child to express their feelings, you're building a trusting relationship that will help in years to come.

The happy face myth

Many people in our society are not able to talk honestly about feelings. Deep down, most of us have bought into the "Happy Face" myth. We believe that being positive and cheerful is good, and that feelings like sadness or anger, which make us uncomfortable, are bad.

How should you respond when your child talks about feelings? The first thing you can do is really listen. Instead of telling the child they shouldn't feel that way, try asking more about why they feel that way. Allow them to "vent" their feelings, and let them do most of the talking. They'll feel better just knowing that you care enough to listen to their problems.

Learning to listen

If your child says, "I hate school," your first reaction may be to deny it. Most parents don't like to hear that their child hates school. After all, school is important to your child's future.

But no matter what your child says, you can respond in a way that will open the gates to communication, instead of slamming them shut. You can say, "What is it you hate about school?" Listen to your child and acknowledge their feelings. You might tell your child about some similar problem you had when you were that age. Let them know that you understand school isn't always a happy experience, but you believe in them and know they will do their best.

No easy answers

Remember that you can't solve every problem in your child's life. Parents want to fix things for their children and make them happy. But in most cases there are no quick fixes or simple answers. This is true for children, teenagers and adults.

You can help your child a whole lot just by listening and caring. Your child will learn that it's okay to talk to you about feelings and difficulties, and that even if you don't have all the answers, you will offer unconditional love. Often children just need to talk, and don't expect solutions to their problems.

If you can keep the lines of communication open from the time your child is very young, you'll be able to help guide them in years to come. The way you talk and listen to your child now can affect how your child talks to you—now and in the future.

Respecting feelings—even the uncomfortable ones

When a child can't talk about feelings of sadness or anger, those feelings don't just go away. They get bottled up until eventually they spill over in some other way. The child may be unkind to a younger brother or sister, or may bully the other kids at school or daycare. Or the child may become sad and withdrawn, unwilling to socialize with other children.

Children who can't express their feelings in a healthy way will find other ways to cope with those feelings. As a child grows older, those bottled-up feelings will continue to cause pain. The older child may turn to alcohol, other drugs and gambling as a way to relieve the pain.

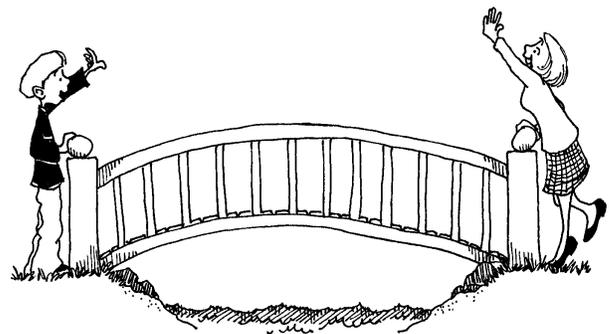
It's healthier for the whole family when your child is able to talk freely about feelings, so that those feelings can be expressed and out in the open rather than bottled up inside.

When you listen to your child, respect their feelings, and talk to them. They'll learn that it's okay to have uncomfortable feelings and problems. They'll understand that these are just a part of life.

Building strong bridges

Talking about feelings is one of the best ways to reach out to your child. You'll create patterns for communication that will last through the teenage years and beyond. When problems do come up, you and your child will have one big advantage—your communication bridges will already be firmly in place.

As your child faces more grown-up challenges, they'll know that it's okay to talk honestly about feelings. It's okay to feel sad, confused, and vulnerable at times. Your child will learn that you're willing to listen and understand. When a child can talk about feelings and problems with an adult who cares, that can make all the difference.



For more information

We understand that everyone's needs are different. Whether you want to prevent your child from using alcohol, tobacco or other drugs, or you want to help your child deal with a drug problem, we can help. Information and prevention programs, group and family counselling, outpatient and residential treatment, and the Protection of Children Abusing Drugs program are offered by Alberta Health Services and its funded services to help your child and your family.

For more information and to find an addiction services office near you, please call the 24-hour Helpline at 1-866-332-2322.

Activity Page

FEELINGS CHART

Remember that ALL feelings are valuable, not just the ones that make you feel good. Sometimes we want to add our own comments such as, "You shouldn't feel sad about that." Try not to deny the child's feelings. By allowing your child to talk freely, you show that you respect their feelings and that their feelings are important.

Talk about some of the feelings that are listed on the chart. Ask your child to complete the following:

1. I feel happy when ...
2. I feel angry when ...
Substitute other feelings and ask the child to explain what makes them feel this way.
3. Everyone feels afraid sometimes, even grown-ups. Can you tell a story of a time when you felt very afraid?

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angry



bored



sad



happy



lonely



frightened

Name _____



surprised



disappointed



embarrassed



excited



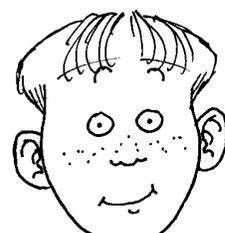
guilty



hurt



confused



interested

- 
4. What makes you feel very happy? Can you tell a story of a time when you made somebody else happy?
 5. What is one thing that you worry about a lot? Why do you worry about it? What is the best thing you can do when you're worried?
 6. What is one thing that makes you very angry? What do you do when you're angry? Is this a good thing to do, or is there something else you could do when you're angry?
 7. What makes you sad? What is the saddest story you know?
 8. What makes you laugh the most? Why is that so funny?
 9. Make up your own questions about feelings. Ask your child questions and talk about the answers.
 10. Talk about your own feelings with your child. Tell stories about your childhood and the feelings you remember having as a child.

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