Helping Children Identify and Cope with Emotions

Elizabeth Davis and Naomi Brower

Most parents want their children to be happy, healthy, and to achieve success. In order to reach this goal parents all across the nation spend millions of dollars on music lessons, sports, tutors, camps etc., all with the intention of providing the foundation that their child needs in order to be a well-adjusted and functioning adult.

A landmark study done by the Carnegie Institute of Technology indicates that 85% of financial success is a result of emotional intelligence versus the 15% due to IQ (Mann, 1918). More recently the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) in the U.S. found similar results in their research (Deutschendorf, 2015). Emotional intelligence is the capacity to identify, interpret and deal with your own emotions and the emotions of others (Goleman, 1995).

So, what are the implications? Are piano lessons a waste? Or will the current emphasis on academic achievement doom a child to failure? No, what this means is that it is the responsibility of parents (and adult figures of influence) to equip themselves with the skills necessary to teach their children how to identify and cope with their emotions. This is referred to, by renowned relationship researcher John Gottman, as “emotion coaching.” Just as sports require a coach to help the athlete improve their understanding of and ability to play a game, an “emotion coach” can help a child identify, label and then suggest and develop the necessary tools to work through their emotions (Gottman & Declaire, 2015).

The development of language skills helps children understand and label their emotions; therefore, children will vary in their ability to identify and label their feelings. Children gain an understanding of their feelings by talking about emotions. It should be noted that parents and caregivers play an important role in this process. Children learn to model a variety of approaches to work through their emotions by listening to their parents and caregivers (Enderud & Vikan, 2007).

Approaches to Help Kids Work Through Their Emotions

Tips for Parents

1. Be aware of your child’s emotions.
2. Find and create opportunities to connect with your child (Eldemire, 2016).
3. Listen to your child with empathy and validate their feelings. Try to help them identify the emotions behind the behaviors (Gottman & Declaire, 2015).
4. Help your child identify and label their emotions. Often behaviors are mistaken for emotions, so help your child identify the difference between frustration, anger, jealousy, sadness and hitting, pushing or yelling, etc. (Eldemire, 2016).
5. Find solutions together. Ask your child his or her opinions and help them process the results of different options.
Behaviors to Avoid

1. Avoid down playing his or her feelings (e.g. “You’re not hurt,” “That’s no reason to cry,” “Big kids don’t cry,” etc.) (Eldemire, 2016).
2. Accept the child’s emotions--any form of mocking emotions can be very damaging.
3. Do not discredit the child’s feelings. If he or she is afraid or uncomfortable don’t discount that--help the child label it!

Emotion coaching provides children with the ability to monitor, evaluate, and modify their emotions and reactions in order to accomplish their goals. Self-regulatory behaviors allow children to control impulses and delay immediate gratification (Smith et al., 2011). Parents and caregivers play an important role in the development of strategies for understanding emotions by modeling effective emotion regulation skills (Goldstein et al., 2004).

References