



The Emotional Experience of Parenting

Emotions are a natural part of the interactions that happen every day between parents and children. How we think about emotions and what we believe about them affect our parenting behaviors and our relationships with our children. This publication talks about ways to understand and think about our emotions and the healthy role they can play in family life. Knowing how emotions work—in ourselves and in our children—helps us connect more deeply with our children and be better guides for their growth, learning, and well-being.

What Good Are Emotions?

An emotion is just another type of information. Like our five senses, emotions communicate things to us about ourselves and the world around us. An emotion is a message telling us to take notice of what is happening. Our brains and central nervous systems are made so that emotional

messages, such as fear or surprise, are experienced in our bodies even before our five senses and our thoughts are able to understand what it is we feel. Emotions are a vital part of our ability to survive and thrive.

Emotions serve many positive purposes. They draw our attention to things. They inform us about our needs and wants in a specific situation or an interaction with another person. They can engage our thinking. They can help us gain a fuller understanding of what is happening around us, inside us, and in our relationships. They can motivate us to take action or change our behavior. They can help us connect with and feel close to other people. The ability to experience, express, and share our emotions with others in healthy ways brings a sense of meaning and joy to life.

Emotions and Everyday Parenting

Powerful emotions of love and caring lie beneath the efforts and sacrifices that we make on behalf of our children's well-being. From these deeply

felt connections also come strong negative feelings. For example, if we perceive our children to be in pain or danger, we may feel anguish, fear, or rage.

The normal daily interactions we have while raising and caring for our children lead us through a wide range of feelings and emotional states: pride, irritation, joy, worry, amusement, guilt, disappointment, affection. Such emotions are indicators of our parenting concerns. They tell us about our needs, wants, goals, and expectations.

Emotions and Parenting Concerns

We have goals for our children—milestones at each stage of life that we believe are important to our children's future success. For example, we want them to learn to read, to graduate from high school or college, to find meaningful work. We also hold expectations for our children that reflect our values about matters both large and small. For example, we may expect children to show respect to others, to keep their rooms clean, to call if they will be late.

It is normal to experience feelings related to how children are meeting our goals and expectations. When we believe that a child's words or actions go against one of our valued goals or violates our expectations, the feelings that arise in us can be quite strong. Intense emotions can affect what we say and do, sometimes resulting in words and actions that we later regret.

Emotions and Stress

It is common to hear the term stress used to describe the discomfort people feel when they perceive that there are many demands but not enough help available to manage them. Under too much stress, we may lose hold of our normal ability to be aware of and manage our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Under too much stress, emotional arousal may become very high. When emotional arousal is high, we are less able to focus our attention. It becomes harder to recognize and respond to the needs of others with flexibility and compassion. Too much stress can freeze us in our tracks or cause us to overreact to situations. Too much stress can leave us feeling disconnected from ourselves and others.

Stress can cause us to express emotions through words and actions that get in the way of the important messages we want to give our children about our goals and values. We know that we need to manage our stress and learn how to calm ourselves when emotions run high. Part of being able to calm ourselves relies on our awareness of the emotions underneath the stress we are experiencing. Simply being able to give names to the specific feelings that accurately match our internal discomfort can reduce the intensity of those feelings. From there,

we can more easily access calming thoughts and behaviors that help us move beyond our negative emotions and recover a neutral or positive mood.

Emotions About Emotions

People have different beliefs about emotions and whether they are healthy or destructive. These beliefs fall into three general categories. Some people learned that certain emotions are "bad" and are not okay to feel or express. For example, as children, they may have been told that feeling sad is "silly," or that, "There is nothing to feel sad about." They may even have been threatened or punished for expressing feelings of sadness. So, as adults, when these people have an experience of sadness, they are not able to accept that they feel sad. They may deny having this feeling, or they may feel anxious, angry, or self-critical about feeling sad. As a result, they are unable to express their sadness normally.

In contrast, other people learned that it is okay to feel and express certain emotions, but they were not shown how to handle those feelings. For example, as children, when they felt sad and cried, the adults around them left them to get over their feelings on their own. They had little guidance to offer their children that would help them understand their feelings and move into a calmer state. So, as adults, when these people have an experience of sadness, they may have a harder time calming themselves down. They may get stuck in that feeling.

Finally, some people learned that experiencing emotions of all sorts is part of being a healthy person and that there are ways to flexibly manage those feelings. For example, as children, their

feelings and expressions of sadness were responded to by the adults around them with acceptance and empathy. They received guidance to help them shift their attention to thoughts or actions that would help them feel better. So, as adults, when these people have an experience of sadness, they are able to feel it and accept it, express it in a healthy way, and reorient themselves to the message the feeling offers as well as options for feeling better.

What we have learned to feel and believe about our feelings can be seen in how we handle our own emotions. It can also be seen in how we respond to our children when they express emotions.

Emotions and Parenting Behaviors

When we experience positive thoughts and feelings, we tend to respond to children in warm, caring ways. In contrast, when we experience negative thoughts and feelings, our responses tend to be harsher. The effect of emotions on our parenting behavior will differ depending on our awareness and understanding of those emotions and on our ability to manage their expression.

When we are more aware of our emotions in our everyday interactions with our children, we are better able to respond to them in healthy, effective ways.



HE-0950

Ellen Abell, *Extension Specialist*, Associate Professor, Human Development and Family Studies, Auburn University

For more information, contact your county Extension office. Visit www.aces.edu/directory.

Published by the Alabama Cooperative Extension System (Alabama A&M University and Auburn University), an equal opportunity educator and employer.

New Sept 2014, HE-0950

© 2014 by the Alabama Cooperative Extension System. All rights reserved.

www.aces.edu