

Why are children's emotions important?

Every parent has faced a situation like this:

An ill-timed tantrum

Tina is in a hurry to finish her shopping and only has one more shop to visit, but just when she needs her four-year-old son Paolo to cooperate, he throws a tantrum. He doesn't want to go any further, he screams, cries, and throws himself on the floor. Tina has mixed emotions – she's very annoyed, but also cringes as all shoppers' eyes focus on her and her screaming son.

Crying for no apparent reason

Jemima, ten months old, is crying. It's not clear why but she has been teary all day. Barry, her dad, has fed her and she's had her nap, but he can't get her interested in her toys. As soon as he walks away, she starts crying again. Barry feels frustrated. He's done all he can and is wondering whether he has spoilt Jemima by giving her too much attention in the past.

Reluctance to separate

Charlie, eighteen months old, cries bitterly when his mother Jenny drops him off at crèche. It wrenches her heart, but she has to go to work.

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Ineffective reasoning with a child

Nada tries hard to be a good mum. She brings up her children by talking to them and explaining things. Her daughter Salma, six years old, still throws tantrums. Nada would have expected her to outgrow them by now. When Salma has to wait her turn for Nada's attention, or she thinks her sister Rana has been given more ice cream, she starts to cry loudly, becoming more and more upset until she has a full-blown tantrum. Nada doesn't want to reward tantrums so she ignores the drama and tells Salma she will talk to her when she is calmer. When Salma calms down, Nada explains the reasons she has to wait. She tells Salma that if she is upset about her serving of ice cream, all she has to do is say so and Nada will listen to her. Salma seems to understand this perfectly well. But next time there's a bit of tension, Salma throws another tantrum. Nada feels frustrated because it doesn't matter how much she reasons with Salma, her behaviour does not improve.

These are everyday examples of how children's emotions affect their behaviour. Of course, there are also positive emotions: children are exuberant about going fast on their new bike, picking flowers, patting a new puppy. It delights parents to see their child so enthusiastic about the world. At these moments, all seems right with their child – smiles and sunshine. But all too quickly something upsets their child: tears and tantrums disrupt the routine, escalate, and parents are left wondering what is the best way to respond (and maybe why their child can't stay happier for longer!).

Coping with children's negative emotions is high on the list of parents' daily challenges. Children can experience negative feelings frequently and intensely (hence the loud crying) and unpredictably (going from happy to downright furious in less than ten seconds!). This is especially true of

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children who are under five years of age. Parents are confronted with daily decisions about how to respond to their child's feelings. Should I ignore my child when she is carrying on so that she knows such behaviour won't be rewarded? If I spend too much time consoling my child, am I delaying her becoming independent?

There are three main reasons why you need to pay attention to your child's emotions:

UNDERSTANDING YOUR CHILD

To understand your child, you need to understand her emotions. Anyone's experience of life is greatly influenced by their emotional state, and this is also true for your child. If you don't know what your child is feeling, you are missing a big part of her experience.

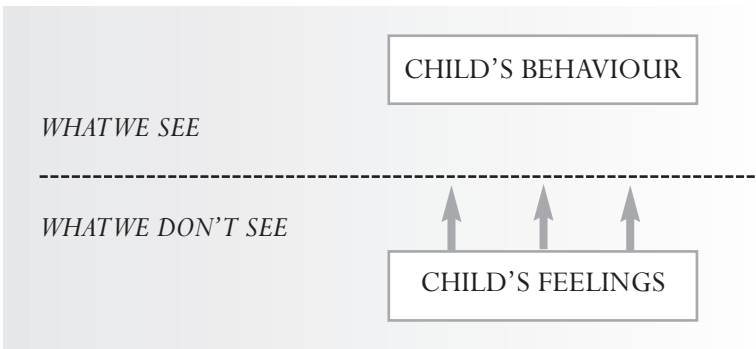
Understanding your child's emotions

1. Where is my child in her emotional development?
2. How does my child feel at different times throughout the day?
3. What things upset my child?
4. What things make my child happy?
5. What does my child need from me to grow strong and healthy emotionally?

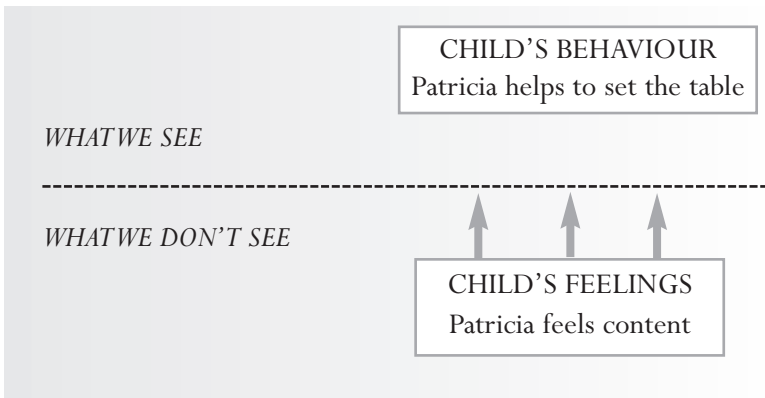
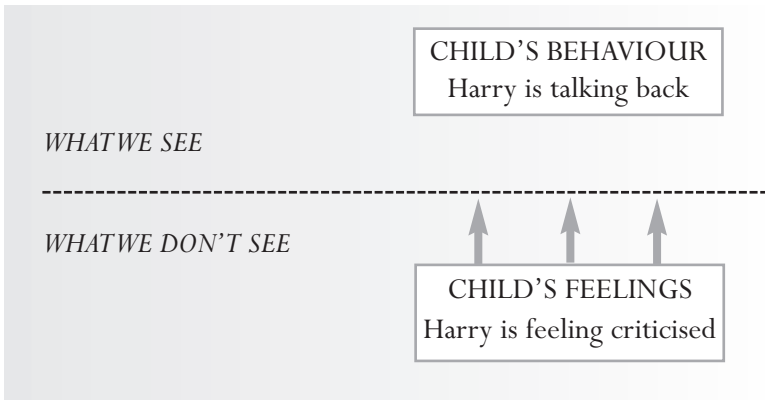
*YOUR CHILD'S EMOTIONAL NEEDS***EMOTIONS DRIVE BEHAVIOUR**

Children's emotions play a large role in their life, partly because emotions drive a lot of behaviour. We don't see children's emotions directly, but rather through their behaviour and facial expressions. This is true of adults as well. To some extent we may be able to tell how adults feel by how they behave. In adulthood the signs may be subtle, for example someone may become less talkative because their feelings have been hurt. People can learn to hide their feelings, but often facial expressions and some changes in behaviour will give them away. Children are more spontaneous. If your child is upset, you will probably know it pretty soon! She will cry, tantrum or pout. Her behaviour is obvious – her feelings less so. By considering your child's behaviour in the context of her feelings, you can understand her better.

Here is a diagram of how feelings and behaviour are related:



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EMOTIONS AFFECT MANY PARTS OF A CHILD'S LIFE

Children's emotions affect their wellbeing, emotional intelligence, behaviour, self-esteem, social competence and school performance. Children's emotions impact on nearly every part of their life. So for you to understand what is going on for your child, and what she needs, you need to have an understanding of her emotions.

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Wellbeing

Wellbeing is subjective. We might think someone's life is great, but only that person can comment on their level of wellbeing – how well they feel overall. Wellbeing is an important marker of emotional health. Someone whose life looks good from a distance may feel awful inside. Likewise, someone who is experiencing hard times may nevertheless have a sense of wellbeing. Wellbeing can be described in many ways – feeling that your life is fine, feeling happy, feeling content. A lack of wellbeing is when a person feels unhappy, insecure, worried, depressed or angry.

Just like you, your child experiences wellbeing (or a lack thereof), but it is generally harder for her to have a clear awareness of her level of wellbeing and to communicate it to others. Your child's experience is limited by the number of years she has been alive. If your child feels unhappy and has been unhappy since she was a toddler, she may not know what it would be like to feel happy. It can be hard for children to make a judgement about whether their level of wellbeing is what it should be. Children who lack a sense of wellbeing may feel anxious, angry or irritable. They may find it hard to enjoy activities, be preoccupied with their negative mood, find it hard to cooperate with people or be uninterested in learning. Your child's level of wellbeing also influences her family and social relationships.

For your child to experience wellbeing, her emotional needs must be met adequately by the people around her. The parent-child relationship is the place where your child's emotional needs are usually met, and there is a huge amount that you can do to meet those needs.

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Elise, ten years old, is a happy and confident girl. She enjoys school, has friends and gets along with her family. She is enjoying life because she feels secure in her relationships with her parents, knows from experience they will help her when she needs them, and is confident about her ability to do the things that are expected of her at school and home.

Emotional intelligence

Emotional intelligence is knowledge and skills related to emotions. Some would argue that emotional intelligence is as important as the traditional notion of intelligence (reasoning and thinking abilities). People who understand their own feelings and who can make judgements about other people's feelings are better equipped to deal with the challenges of life. In addition to having awareness of their feelings, people also need to know how to manage them so that they don't get in the way of their goals. For example, when angry, a person may be tempted to speak rudely. Yet if the person requires someone's help, they would disadvantage themselves by being rude (it would reduce the other person's motivation to help). A person with high emotional intelligence would recognise that they are tempted to be rude because they feel angry, and would either be able to mask their feelings, or calm themselves so that they are able to speak pleasantly to the person whose help they need.

Children gradually learn about their feelings and how to cope with them. Emotions can influence emotional intelligence in a number of ways. For example, if your child is often upset, she will be less likely to develop an awareness of others' feelings (being so often overwhelmed with her own

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feelings). Having intense bouts of distress can also interfere with development of emotional intelligence because it is much easier to control emotions when they are less intense. A child who experiences intense emotions (especially negative emotions such as anger) is less able to practise managing her feelings.

Trent is a four-year-old boy who has a secure attachment relationship with his parents. They speak to Trent about his feelings and other people's feelings and soothe him when he is distressed. Such supportive parenting has allowed him to gain awareness of what he is feeling and what other people are feeling. This means that his ability to regulate his emotions is as developed as it should be for a four-year-old and he is able to concentrate and get along with people, and recover from upsets.

Behaviour

It is important for your child's adjustment (and your sanity) that she is cooperative and behaves in a socially acceptable manner. Emotions are closely linked with behaviour. Difficult behaviour – disobedience, rudeness, and lack of cooperation – often stems from emotional turmoil. A child who is angry, sad, or feels that people don't like her will find it difficult to behave herself. It makes sense: if we feel criticised or undervalued, our motivation to cooperate is reduced. A lot of children's distress comes out in their behaviour. Children have a limited ability to stand back from a situation and to put feelings into words and this makes children susceptible to 'acting out' their feelings.

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Billy is a nine-year-old boy who often feels angry and irritable. He gets easily annoyed with other children and with his family. He yells and often doesn't do as his teacher and his parents ask him. He feels they are just trying to boss him around. Because of his irritable mood, he overreacts to minor events in his day (not finding a pair of socks, a child taking his pencil in class). If things don't go his way, he becomes overwhelmed with anger. On the surface, he is badly behaved. Underneath, he has emotional problems.

Self-esteem

Emotions can impact on a child's self-esteem. For example, a child with emotional problems will see that her peers cope better with school than she does. This comparison may affect a child's self-esteem – she may feel she is not as competent as other children the same age.

Cassandra, eleven years old, feels insecure and worried a lot of the time. She can see that her classmates can cope with situations that she tries to avoid. Going on school camps feels unbearable, as does speaking in front of the class. Often she gets the feeling people don't like her. Compared with her peers, she experiences much more stress when in new situations, because of her low self-esteem and lack of faith in her ability to cope.

Social competence

Children who have emotional problems can run into social problems in two ways. Anxious and depressed children often withdraw into themselves, show a lack of confidence and so may become vulnerable to bullying. Other children might find them unappealing because they look glum and

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downhearted. Angry children tend to lash out at their peers, and so can quickly become unpopular and ostracised. In contrast, children who experience positive emotions are likely to be helpful, to play well with others, and to be socially skilled (not losing their temper, being able to wait their turn).

Derek, eight, has moved school for the third time in as many years. But it only took a week for him to put most of the class offside. When someone is in his way, he pushes them; he doesn't cooperate and insists other children listen to his ideas about what games to play. The other children find it is not worth the trouble to hang around Derek – he disrupts their games, and does and says things that hurt other children. It's easy for teachers and parents to focus on Derek's appalling behaviour, but emotionally he is unhappy and tense, and so normal and pleasant social interactions become nearly impossible for him.

School performance

Your child's performance in the classroom is influenced by her emotions. Anxiety and anger can easily disrupt your child's attention or motivation, and she may fail to perform at the level at which she is capable. Not all academic problems relate to emotional problems, but research does show that emotional problems (for example, even mild anxiety) interfere with children's learning and academic achievement. Negative emotions can preoccupy your child and reduce her attention and energy for schoolwork. This is true for adults as well as children – if we're worried or angry, it can be hard to concentrate on our work. Emotional health doesn't automatically lead to good school learning, but it gives your

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child an advantage. All things being equal, she is more likely to reach her potential if she is emotionally healthy.

Han is a seven-year-old girl with anxiety. She worries whether her work is good enough, spends a lot of time wondering if her classmates like her and worries her mum won't return to pick her up from school. While the teacher is explaining how to add numbers and count by 10s, she is wondering if her mum is okay, and if she will have someone to play with at lunchtime. She is distracted by her worries and isn't giving full attention to her work. Motivation also lags. How can Han get excited about counting by 10s if she is preoccupied with all the things that might go wrong?

SOME POSSIBLE PATHWAYS FROM FEELINGS TO OUTCOMES

