

BEGINNINGS WORKSHOP

Granting Children Their Emotions

by Ilse Elisabeth Plattner

At the airport: A little girl, about two and a half years old, stands in front of the chairs where the adults sat, heartbreakingly crying, tears rolling down her face. The mother looks away, so does the grandmother. Both look in the opposite direction of the child, as if neither hear the child nor belong with the child.

In the supermarket: A boy, about four years old, walks backwards along the side of the trolley that is pushed by the father and the mother. The boy cries furiously, his face is blushed, his nose is running; he attempts to face the parents, but he cannot get their attention.

Luca, eighteen months old, is playing with some toys in the living room. All of a sudden he starts shouting for joy. The parents, watching TV, shout, both at the same time "Lucaa!" (meaning "Be quiet!").

Sabrina, three years old, refuses to leave the car. She does not want to enter the aunt's house because she is terribly afraid of her dog. The aunt walks towards the car, with a smile on her face, the dog at her side, emphasising that this dog is a very nice one and does not do any harm to a little pretty girl such as Sabrina is.

Benjamin, seven years old, had watched on TV a report about an earthquake. Now he is afraid of a possible earthquake. The mother laughs at him and calls the father from the other room, telling him of Benjamin's worry. The father laughs, too, telling Benjamin that in their geographical region there has never been an earthquake nor will there ever be one.

Such scenarios are most probably familiar to every parent. The common aspect in these examples is the fact that the children expressed their feelings which, however, were either

rejected or not taken seriously by the adults. The question arises: could this harm the development of a child?

Expression of Feelings: A Child's Tool for Communication

The expression of feelings is one of the first abilities that a child develops. Already, during the first four months a baby develops emotions such as anger, surprise, joy, and sadness. Fear appears between the fifth and the seventh month. Each watchful mother and father will easily recognize such emotions from the baby's facial expressions. Other emotions such as shame, envy, guilt, contempt, or pride emerge during the second year of life (Izard & Malatesta, 1987). These are basic emotions that are found all over the world, even when the way in which these emotions are expressed is shaped by cultural influences.

Children learn at very young age to differentiate between situations in which to show or to suppress certain emotions. In western cultures, for instance, two-year-old children have already learnt how to mask their feelings (e.g. not to cry after falling down). Three-year-old children know already how to pretend false emotions (e.g. to show gratitude and say "thank you" for a present that actually disappoints them) (Kaplan, 1998). Such learning, however, does not mean that children are in full control of their feelings and that their emotional states would not need attention.

Parents might not always be aware of the fact that the expression of feelings is an important tool for children to communicate with the adult world. Since, particularly, the very young children do not yet have sufficient language skills through which they could express their fears, anger, disappointment but also happiness, they have to make use of their smiling or crying to keep in touch with the adults. But children need adults who respond to their emotional signals, either by smiling back or holding them or nurturing their



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interest, and this applies already to babies. "*Babies prefer adults who read their signals accurately, interpret what they need, and respond with appropriate care and stimulation*" (Schickedanz et al., 2001:232).

Effects of Not Taking Children's Emotions Seriously

When observing parents in situations when small children attempt to express their feelings (as in the preceding stories), one often gets the impression that adults are somehow evasive or even ignorant when confronted with a child's emotions, particularly the negative ones.

Parents try to distract the discomfort of babies by moving some toys above their faces, hoping that this would stop them from crying. With older children, emotions such as rage and fury are often responded to with rejection or even punishment, and parents expect the child to feel ashamed about his or her behaviour.

When children's fears and anxieties are laughed at or belittled (like in scenarios 4 and 5 above), adults make an attempt to rationalise the world. In doing so, adults convey the message to a child that his/her emotions and feelings are wrong. Children, however, might interpret these messages in such a way that they come to the belief that they are inadequate because they are *emotional*.

Various effects can be assumed as a result of not granting the children their emotions. One of the effects could be a negative impact on the *social development*. In situations when parents do not respond at all to children's emotions or pretend not to perceive any of their tears and cries (as described in scenarios 1 and 2 above), children will experience themselves as helpless, and also as weak, inferior, and dependent. When children undergo such situations repeatedly, they should not be expected to become *assertive* when interacting with others. Responding to children's emotional needs with rejection or hostility will also lead them to perceive the world as a hostile place that cannot be trusted (Erikson, 1963). Instead of trust, they will develop a predominant sense of *mistrust* that makes it difficult for them to relate warmly to others (Kaplan, 1998; Schickedanz et al., 2001).

Another consequence of inappropriate responses to children's expression of feelings can be a wrong *self-concept*. To reject children because they react emotionally, will, if this happens

repeatedly, have a negative impact on the development of their self-concept, particularly when they are expected to feel ashamed about their behaviour. This will lead children to start doubting themselves as a person, and as a result impair their *self-confidence*. The same might happen when children's emotions are belittled or laughed at and when, consequently, the children start feeling stupid and dumb.

The way adults respond to children's feelings might also affect the development of their *problem-solving* skills. One can regularly observe that parents respond to small children's efforts to express their discomfort by quickly putting some food into a child's mouth. With such behaviour the child will learn to associate eating with solving problems. The child will internalise "*that eating can provide a means for dealing with unpleasant and unclear emotional states*" (Halgin & Whitbourne, 2000:430). In the long run, this could even lead to eating disorders at a later stage in life.

The response to children's emotions is also of relevance for their *physical health*. Halgin & Whitbourne (2000:223) call the inhibition of emotional expression a "*key ingredient in the relationship between psychological functioning and health*." For instance, when a child worries or is afraid of something (e.g. an earthquake, a dog) and when these fears are not taken seriously, the child will feel tense and restless, i.e., the child will experience stress. When a child goes on crying for a long time (be it because of anger or disappointment or anything else), he/she will not only feel helpless, but the child will also start sweating, breath shallow, and develop muscular tension and headache. Such symptoms will reinforce the stress, and stress weakens the immune system (Halgin & Whitbourne, 2000).

It seems that children are quite resistant to such effects since many have such experiences on a daily basis when their emotions are rejected, yet seem not to develop serious mental problems. Once-in-a-while incidents of not granting children their emotions might not do any severe harm to them. However, repeated experiences in this regard should not be underestimated in their potential to make a child's mental health vulnerable. The effects described here might not become obvious for some time. But deficits in self-confidence, trust, assertiveness, interaction with others, and problem-solving skills usually become obvious at school age. Sometimes such deficits only become addressed, if at all, in later life when people spend years in psychotherapy or other forms of treatment to overcome their seemingly simple problems.

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Empathy: A Way of Granting Children Their Emotions

Parents have to learn positive ways of interacting with their children's emotions. They have to consider that comprehensive emotional processes and the way others respond to them shape the personalities of children (Schickedanz et al., 2001). In the era of the information and computer age it seems that cognitive performances of a child receive more attention than ever before. However, the best cognitive development will only succeed when the emotional potential is promoted as well.

One way of granting children their emotions is by showing empathy (a central characteristic of emotionally intelligent behaviour, according to Salovey & Mayer, 1990). However, it is not always easy to really "put oneself into a child's shoes" for the simple fact that, for adults, the world has become a very rational place where emotions are often regarded as "irrational." However, whilst *listening* to what the child has to say or whilst watching the child's facial expression (instead of just talking to the child), everyone can learn to understand what a child has in mind and how a child feels. Whilst *asking* questions (instead of just giving answers), one will explore even more understanding and the child will develop a certainty that his/her feelings are taken seriously. This will already take a lot of stress away from them and it will assist the child in restoring a psychological balance.

To grant children their emotions would also mean letting them feel sorry for themselves (instead of feeling ashamed). In various cultures, self-pity is regarded as something

negative, and so is pride (which is interpreted as vanity). Such feelings, however, are important. Only if children are allowed to feel sorry for themselves will they develop the ability to also feel sorry for others and to show empathy. Feeling sorry for oneself also helps children to differentiate between what benefits and what causes harm to their well-being. Pride helps children to become aware of themselves as valuable persons. Children who are allowed to feel proud of their abilities and capabilities learn to believe in themselves and develop self-confidence as well as self-esteem.

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Using Beginnings Workshop to Train Teachers by Kay Albrecht

Increasing trust: Plattner refers to the importance of trust for young children's abilities to relate successfully with others. To make sure that children in your center are able to trust the teachers and other adults in your school to meet their needs, analyze the availability and frequency of trust messages embedded in your curriculum and interactions with children. Create volunteer pairs to observe each other for situations when children's emotions are taken seriously or not taken seriously. After adequate time for observation, make sure to find the time to share your observations and determine ways to learn from the experience.

Encouraging empathy: Taking the child's perspective to understand how he or she is feeling may be a challenge for adults, as Plattner points out. Help teachers practice validating emotions and exploring feelings with children by role-playing scenes and examples from teachers' experiences both in and outside of the school.

What to do when parents or other teachers don't handle children's emotions seriously: All of us have been faced with the dilemma of seeing children's emotions ignored, belittled, evaded, or punished and not knowing what to do or how to handle it. Discuss this scenario with teachers, exploring the real and ethical challenges presented by such situations. Talk about how to address such incidences directly, tangentially, and with the support of mental health professionals.

