

Helping Children Process Emotionally Difficult Topics

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August 2020



Mass shootings. Racism. COVID-19. School intruder drills. Sexual assault. These are just a few of the many headlines to which we are exposed daily. These crises bring up big emotions of fear, anxiety, grief, and anger, and it is important to recognize the impact they have on our individual and collective emotional well-being. Additionally, these events bring up traumas such as death, losing a job, hunger and homelessness, and acts of violence which create personal struggle and further exacerbate inequalities. How do our families, youth groups, church communities, and service organizations respond to these events in a way that honors who we are and who we want to be?

When we are responsible for parenting or caring for children, this self and community awareness is even more crucial as we are called upon to guide young people in acknowledging and expressing their emotions. When I was nine years old, my best friend Chanel and her mom were in a fatal car accident on a Friday evening trip to the mall. On the following Monday morning, I was complaining of a stomachache. As we drove to school, my father paused and asked, "Do you think your stomachache is because you're worried about being at school without Chanel?" This simple question shifted my perspective on emotions and thoughts. I was able to name "sadness" and "fear," and began to better understand the connection between my body and mind. This is a simple example of how we can create space in the life of a young person which allows them to grow in emotional intelligence.

Although there is no easy way to support children in navigating emotionally difficult times and topics, here are four steps that will help.

Be Intentional

Young children's cognitive and moral development does not yet support the nuances that we as adults can understand. The abstract and advanced thought processes which are necessary to understand the multiple perspectives and historical and/or cultural complexities of tragedies and crisis situations are typically not developed until the late elementary or teenage years. Because of this, emotional and physical safety is of utmost importance. Children are able to understand and process more

complex and nuanced information within a trusted relationship and in a familiar and comfortable space. For example, when sharing about the death of a grandparent with your child, you might bring them into your lap or into a cuddle on the couch, remind them of the specific people who are still here to help comfort and support them, and the specific activities that will be done to honor and remember Grandma, while offering them space to respond, ask questions, and feel.

When sharing information with a child which is likely to cause fear, anger, or sadness, it is best to share the most simple version in a developmentally-appropriate way (see suggestions in this article from [Common Sense Media](#)). Young children should be sheltered from the tidbits and headlines heard on television news and via online outlets. They will hear it, and absorb it, but not know how to process it or understand it.

Name It to Tame It!

In order to best understand and use an emotion that feels overwhelming, we can “name it to tame it!” a phrase Dr. Dan Siegel, a clinical professor of psychiatry at UCLA and author of *The Yes Brain* (Bantam, 2018) and *The Whole-Brain Child* (Delacorte Press, 2011), as well as a number of publications on how trauma affects the brain, uses to describe the simple act of naming the feeling we are experiencing. This process offers a sense of calm and control over the effects of that feeling. Below is a list of resources that can guide parents and caregivers through this type of exercise.

- [COVID: How to Identify Feelings](#), CHI Health
- The “[Weather Station](#)” activity, Blissful Kids
- [RAIN](#) mindfulness exercise, Blissful Kids

When we name it, we can accept it, or feel it more deeply, or choose to do something with it. When we experience a difficult feeling, we often try to make the feeling go away, avoid it, or deny it. Unfortunately, that approach tends to make the feeling grow in intensity and show itself in unhelpful ways. If we can be **curious about our feeling**, (e.g. “Why am I feeling this?” “What is this telling me?”) rather than ignoring it, we are much more likely to find a life-giving response to the feeling.

Permission to Feel

Once we have identified an emotion, then what? One helpful next step is to be sure we give our children *permission to feel*. This could include saying “Yes, this is scary!” or “This is really sad. It’s hard. And, we can do hard things.” Although it is incredibly

tempting to reassure a child with “It’s ok...” or “Don’t be [sad/scared/angry]!” these responses communicate that the child should *not feel*. When we ignore difficult feelings, they do not go away! Instead, they may appear to go dormant but later explode out in an unrelated and unhelpful way, or, they fester under the surface and create trauma-related health responses such as stress-related medical conditions or mental illnesses, relational conflicts, or emotional distress.

For more information on how to build and guide emotional intelligence, see [When a Child's Emotions Spike How Can a Parent Find Their Best Self](#) and the **RULER** (an acronym for Recognizing, Understanding, Labeling, Expressing, and Regulating emotions) program at the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence.

Build Connections and Resilience

There are additional steps we can take as families or within communities to build resilience in our children and help them to ride the wave of emotions that come from difficulties in life. For young children, quality time that includes touch and connection is key (i.e. reading a book together). Physical activity (taking a walk, playing sports, etc.) and intentional down time such as individual play time and guided breathing/meditation or an afternoon nap/quiet time can help a child of any age regulate their emotions. Older children and teens need to know who they can talk to and be offered those opportunities (e.g. a check-in about the day at family dinner, a phone call or text from a mentor or family friend).

Within church communities, young people need to have permission to feel, and a space in which to process those feelings. This space and permission might come in the form of a youth group or small group; however, the connection can also come from a less formalized one-on-one conversation with a lay leader or anyone who makes a commitment to fully listening to and validating the young person’s experience.

When children and teens are able to build and use these connections, they are more likely to know, understand, and discuss their emotions, and be better equipped to make meaning out of their experiences. This in turn can help young people to be prepared to stand up to injustice and stand up against the policies and cultural norms which fuel so many of the tragedies.

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