

How Children's Emotions Work

Early in their lives most children develop at least a few hot-button issues that easily generate big feelings for them. Separations, sharing, going to sleep, getting dressed, sibling tussles, and the limits you set are the kinds of things that can send a young child into an upset. It doesn't take long to develop a good feel for the kinds of situations that can develop emotional heat in your child.

The expectations on the shoulders of parents at emotional moments are enormous. *Make your child happy. Solve the problem. If you can't solve the problem, make him stop so others aren't inconvenienced. Be a loving parent. Discipline him. Prove to everyone that you are in charge. Make sure he doesn't go through the worst of the troubles that you went through as a child. Make sure he doesn't get spoiled.* These moments can be wearing and confusing. There are proven ways you can beam the love you have for your child straight to his heart. He was born to thrive on your love, and you have so much to give.

You can help your child heal from the emotional dings and scrapes of childhood. And as you help him with his feelings, you will free his mind for learning and keep his heart open for friendship, co-operation and fun.

Your Child Is Unique

Your child learns at an amazing rate during the first years of his life. There is no child in the world just like your child! His mind is active, growing and distinctive. Your child's development may be similar to the path of other children, but your child's minds will always be unique.

Your child's uniqueness has probably delighted you and also baffled you. How can a child be loving one minute and then be passionately upset about which way his toast is cut just moments later? Why does that time you spend playing the game you love suddenly turn into a blow-up over who gets to carry the snack from the counter to the table?

The explanation lies in how your child's mind works. Feelings play a surprisingly important role in your child's life and in yours.

Your Child Thrives on His Connection with You

Your child's mind is truly a wonder of the world. With its hundred billion neurons and its million billion neural connections, it is active, plastic, and growing in complexity every day. But it needs to be fuelled by the attention of someone who knows him, cherishes him, and has his best interests in mind. That's you!

Children benefit from a close relationship with their parents. Feeling close enables them to learn, and to successfully handle the stresses in their lives. During a child's early life, the back-and-forth flow of communication with warm, positive adults is especially important. Communication with you literally builds your child's intelligence.

When your child and you are feeling close and connected, his brain forms the neural pathways that allow him to learn, remember, and think. His brain is building capacity every day. Just as his body needs good food, his brain needs the presence of an adult who can read his signals and respond to him with an attitude of interest and support. The times your eyes meet his, the times you watch him with a smile as he leaps from the sofa, the times you bend down to see if he needs help with his shoes all build his intelligence.

When he feels safe, loved, and connected to the adults around him, a child's intelligence is in full gear. He can learn, co-operate, be flexible with his wants and needs, and tune in to the needs of others. A sense of connection allows all parts of his brain to work together. Connection helps a child *build* intelligence and it helps him *use* the intelligence he already has.

When a Child Feels Connected:

His brain stem – the self-preservation centre of his brain – is going about its business of governing his reflexes, his heart rate, his breathing, and other basic bodily functions. It detects no threat in the environment, so it signals his whole body that all is well.

His limbic system – the social and emotional hub of his mind – senses the good intentions of those around him. Your child's limbic system is like an invisible radar beam. It sends out a steady stream of inquiry: *Is there someone here who knows me, likes me, and is attentive to me?* It reads the answers through nonverbal signals like eye contact, touch, facial expression, tones of voice, and body language. These signals tell the story of a person's inner state without a word being spoken. When you or another caring adult signal "I'm here, I like you. I'm available," and his brain stem senses no danger, your child's brain has the connection it needs. His limbic system can then co-ordinate communication between all parts of his brain. With his whole mind in gear, he feels confident, safe, and sure that life is good. He is eager. He is ready to learn.

His prefrontal cortex – the seat of your child's reasoning, impulse control, short-term memory, judgement, and the governor of his attention span – lights up. Your child's brain stem says, "There's no danger," his limbic system says, "Good, attentive people are here," so your child's cerebral cortex can engage. When all parts of his brain are working together, he can remember what he learns, develop new skills, and his judgement improves over time.

When your child feels connected, he can concentrate on an activity that interests him – he can allow his little sister or friend to play with a favourite toy; he can put on roller skates for the first time, and enjoy learning as he slips and slides on the pavement with help from you. His need for positive connection is met, so he can be a learner. He can be good company.

In short, your ability to connect with your child is vital. When he can carry the feel of your warm attention inside him, new experiences are welcome. If he can fill up on your caring several times a day, he'll learn quickly and well. Difficulties will come his way of course, and when they do he will have a harder time learning and getting along with others.

But when that happens, he's not 'bad'. He just needs you to reach for him and reconnect, so his brain can work properly again.

Broken Connection: The Invisible "Off" Switch

When your child feels threatened, when he is frustrated, or when he has lost his sense of connection. His prefrontal cortex shuts down. He literally can't think. It's an instantaneous process, and you've seen it happen hundreds of times. It has also happened to you!

You may have seen your child cross over from being easygoing to being balky and irritated after just half an hour of TV before dinner. Before the programme, he's playing well. Afterward, he is prone to upsets over small things like being asked to set the table, or having to sit in one chair, rather than another that he prefers. You wonder what came over him!

Perhaps your child is playing well with a younger sibling as you fold clothes, watching them casually. You turn away to answer the phone, talk for ten minutes, and come back to two children who are bickering loudly. You think, "What's wrong with you two! Can't I leave you alone for ten minutes?"

Perhaps you have planned an evening out, and have been looking forward to it for several days. Your patience with your children is strong. The sitter calls and cancels. A moment later, your child asks for a glass of milk, and you snap. You tell him that he can get it himself. Your irritation grows, and you decide that, as a matter of fact, he needs to pick up his toys right this minute – the house is a mess and you never get enough help around here.

Difficulties at moments like these aren't your child's fault, or yours. They are the result of how our intelligence is constructed. Our minds are designed to be in steady communication with others, and to function in a co-operative and nurturing environment. TV and phone calls seem harmless enough, but they are among the many things in life that can fray a child's sense of connection. On the parent's side, long days of work and worry can create a sense of isolation that eats away at parent's good will, so that caring for a child feels difficult.

When the sense of safety and connection breaks down, we all experience feelings of upset. Tripped up by our feelings, we can't think well, and we don't assume the best about the people we're with.

Without a sense of connection, the limbic system can't do its job of co-ordinating all the parts of the brain. It can't bathe the brain's reasoning, planning, and learning centres with the vital signal that all is well. It can't co-ordinate the processing of incoming information. Negative feelings flood the limbic system and paint the next moments or hours with upset.

Just as all nutritious food contains some indigestible matter, every good day will have some moments of disconnection. And just as the body has an elegant system for processing both what's digestible and what's not, both you and your child have an elegant system for recovering from the upsets that are part of everyday life.

Emotion is Your Child's Friend, and Yours

Your child was born with a sturdy emotional repair process. When he feels upset, and can't think, he immediately tries to remedy the situation. If you move close and listen to him, he'll cry hard, or have a tantrum. Or he may set up a situation that lets him laugh. These emotional responses are vital. A good laugh, a good cry, or a good tantrum with your support will reset your child's mind so he can feel your caring. Then he can reason, learn and co-operate once again.

While your child is crying, having a tantrum, or laughing long and hard, he's releasing the tensions that have gripped his limbic system. He's doing his part to untangle the crossed wires in his mind. **He will benefit greatly if you move close, keep him safe, and give his mind the time to unload big feelings and absorb your caring!** He'll also thrive on playtimes during which he can laugh, tussle and enjoy you, close and engaged.

As You Listen, Crying Heals the Hurt

You can help your child by listening to her when she cries, for as long as she cries! 'Staylistening' is a strategy that restores a child's emotional equilibrium by giving her a chance to fully express how she feels. If she wants something she can't have, you listen to her, offering your caring in place of the thing she wants so badly. Staylistening is the opposite of what most parents feel like doing when a child has a meltdown, so the first time you try it, you will probably have to gather your courage before you plunge in!

A child who is feeling tension carried over from earlier difficult times might cry hard or tantrum loudly over a very small issue. We don't know exactly why children's biggest feelings come wrapped around the smallest issues, but you can count on it. It happens in every family.

Your caring has great healing power during emotional moments. A parent who moves in close and listens gives his child an absolutely vital gift – a loving connection, and the chance to get free of tension.

When you listen to your child's upset, her feelings will become intense, last awhile, and then evaporate. Her topsy-turvy limbic system heals fastest when it has her full concentration, and yours, on those feelings. Then feelings ejected and connection made, it rights itself.

When you try to reason with or lecture a child who is upset, both you and the child become frustrated. While she is upset, a child can't make sense of anything you try to get across. Her limbic radar is looking desperately for connection. Reasoning doesn't work, because the child's prefrontal cortex has shut down. She can't connect along a verbal or rational pathway while she is upset. When you listen, you bathe her limbic system with exactly what it needs: warm, nonverbal signals that you're paying attention. It takes a while, but this nonverbal pathway leads you toward your sweet, rational, co-operative child.

When parents adopt a strategy of Staylistening through their children's upsets, a close relationship between parent and child can continue into adolescence. Children learn that it is safe to fall apart when their minds are snarled. They feel that their parents understand them, and know that what they say while they're angry or crying is what they need to say to get rid of the feelings. And parents learn that intense feelings that a child expresses are feelings that will soon be gone. They learn that emotional moments are prime times to communicate love. Staylistening is a tool for handling your child's feelings about getting up and dressed in the morning, separation, troubles with sharing, aggression, fear, and frustration when learning isn't going smoothly.

It's also a tool that helps your child learn when you must set limits with her.

Setting Limits and Expectations

Although parents are encouraged to listen to a child's tears and tantrums, this isn't a permissive form of parenting!

Parents need to stop off-track behaviour as soon as it crops up. It doesn't make sense to allow your child to whine, to pout, to pester her siblings, to give up on learning tasks, or to engage in other behaviours that aren't co-operative or thoughtful. She is sending up flares: "Help me! I can't think!" she's not a bad child, but she *is* off track.

She needs your help to recover and connect. Talking to her, reasoning with her, negotiating with her, punishing her are strategies that miss the point: her brain is unable to function properly. She needs connection.

When your child goes off track, try setting limits or expectations in a way that addresses the underlying cause of her troubles. The minute you see that your child's behaviour isn't making sense:

Move in close – your child needs a connection with you so she can think again.

Bring the limit – physically intervene, without harshness, to stop any behaviour that doesn't make sense.

Move in to hold her arm so she can't throw a toy.

Move in to hold her leg so she can't kick the door.

Move in and follow her to her bedroom as she stomps off in anger.

Move in to hold her pyjamas in front of her when she refuses to put them on.

Move in to keep her from hopping onto the chair that she knows her little sister wants.

Move in to put your arm around her when she throws her lunchbox down after a hard afternoon.

Set the limit. Do this as your child's ally, not as her foe or her overlord. She needs you on her side while her mind is in disarray. She needs a sound intervention, without apology and also without anger, if possible.

(If possible) **Reflect Her Feelings** and **What She Wants To Do** then **Set The Limit**

"You want to throw that, but that toy's not for throwing."

"You're feeling angry/upset and want to kick the door, but the door's not for kicking."

"You're feeling angry/upset and want to go to your room, but I don't want to leave you alone when you're feeling like that."

"You want to play some more, but here are your pyjamas. It's time to put them on."

"You want to hop on that chair but your sister was ready to sit on that one."

Hold the limit – stay with her and keep holding the expectation that she will co-operate, but don't hurry her. Her mind has to fight through lots of emotional gunk before she can feel enough connection to co-operate. That fight is a healing one. Holding the limit will mean doing things such as:

Keeping your hand on her arm so she can't throw things.

Continuing to hold her leg so she can't kick.

Putting your hand on her back as she buries herself in her pillow.

Reminding her that her pyjamas are right next to her, as she cries and protests about going to sleep.

Putting an arm in front of the chair she's trying to grab, then moving quickly to provide a barrier when she tries to climb on from another angle.

Following her to her room after she's squirmed away from you in upset.

Staylisten. Offer eye contact, gentle touch, and your attention. Expect a passionate emotional response. Children hate to feel unsafe and disconnected. The amount of emotional charge they unleash can be great if they are clearing out an extra load of feelings that have been bothering them for a while.

Don't give in. offer warmth instead. The limit you set, if it's reasonable, is useful to her. She'll hate it, tell you all her feelings, finish, and relax. If you're offering warm attention, you're giving her what she really needs – a refreshed connection with you.

Setting limits and playlistening are tools to use on the spur of the moment, when there's trouble afoot. Special Playtimes will help you connect and reconnect on a regular basis.