



How to regulate emotions?

As adults, parents or professionals in charge of the children God has brought into our lives, we seek that our children and teenagers are safe. But many times they don't know they are and don't know how to express it. This time we want to give you some tools to help you understand and teach your children about their emotions.

When a baby is born and is under the care of his/her parents, something that happens thousands of times is that the baby cries, laughs or moves in a way that causes a reaction in his parents to respond immediately to hold them, meet their needs, rock them in their arms, etc. These actions repeated overtime form new connections in their minds that we can see in their behavior and relationships, these confirm the child that is being taken care of, that he's loved and seen. There comes a point when they just "know".

The children we have received in our care have experienced a rupture or failure in this normal process of development of the relationship. That is why when they come into our lives we need to take in consideration that we cannot simply "delete" what happened before. There will be obstacles and setbacks because of their history but we cannot give up on them. The way God created our brain, heart and spirit allows for new healthy connections to be formed and eventually replace the old toxic ones.

Following the development line, when you have a baby no one expects them to calm by themselves. As adults that take care of the child we know that we are the ones to help him/her calm down. Eventually, as a child is growing up, they will know how to handle emotions better. But it all began in the process off 'co-regulation' with their mother or father by their side. We're used to rocking, making sounds, singing and telling them "oh baby you're tired", "you must be hungry", "it's ok love I'm coming", etc. and through this actions we're helping them make sense of their inner world. This helps regulate their emotions.

It's a process that has an order, we cannot get to point B if we haven't gone through point A. In order to be able to acknowledge and express how they feel, they need to be able to

be acknowledge by an external caregiver to show, reflect, teach and model how to calm.

The problem we face is that we have children 6, 8 or 13 years old that physically look "big or old enough" but their ability to regulate their feelings is at the level of a baby because no one ever taught them how to do it. Maybe the adult in charge didn't know how to do it himself or how to calm the child, or maybe he did but the connection and the ability were broken.

We need to help them calm down in order for them to learn how to do it on their own. And this requires patience, dedication, self-awareness and awareness of the child. If we cannot have self-control before reacting, how can we teach our children? This requires from us to accept the place where they are but also do whatever is necessary to help them move from that place with our help. It requires that we let go of our expectations of how it should be today and recognize it might take a while and extra effort to get to where they should be. And maybe, we'll have to re-adjust our expectations of how it should be.

In practical terms, how can we help them regulate?

If your child is crying or suffering from something, don't question desperately "why are you crying!?" hoping they stop crying or answer directly. Try to understand yourself, almost as if you were a detective gathering pieces of information, observe "why is he/she crying?".

It may be he's sad, angry, scared, maybe something happened that triggered an old painful memory, and it's important that you say it: "I understand you're sad". That is what we mean when we say validate their feelings. It's being able to see, acknowledge and use our words to describe what's happening.

Sometimes we may ask "why are you crying?" and the child says "I don't know". Sometimes they truly don't know what it is or how to put it into words and we as adults can help them figure it out.

With this is also important to give them time, pushing them to give us an answer will only increase their fear response and may withdraw or fight back even more. Remember that fear is a primitive response and the only way they will be able to talk about how they feel is if they calm first. You can say "I'll give you some time, do you want me to stay near or come back in a few minutes?"

Their reactions can be a learned mechanism they have used in the past that has helped them out of the situation, or an unhealthy way to express their frustration, but regardless of this, whatever we can see in the moment is what we need to help them cope with. We can teach them to use their words and express themselves in a healthier way only if we give them the tools and as we connect with them first.

Examples of how to validate their emotions:

- Stop what you're doing, choose to be fully present and observe. This may imply go back and see what could have happened before it escalated and try to put the pieces together in your mind.
- Put it into words: "I understand that made you feel angry...", "I can see you're sad because ...", "I can see you feel scared when ...", "You seem overwhelmed by ...", "I can see you like ...", "I see it makes you feel happy when...", etc.
- We should never tell a child that has experienced trauma or abuse "stop crying!" that will not remove their fear, sadness or anger. We must help them face

whatever made them cry, respecting their timing and help them see in us that we will not react the same abusive way they experienced in the past.

What does the Word say?

He was despised and rejected-
a man of sorrows, acquainted with deepest grief.
We turned our backs on him and looked the other way.
He was despised, and we did not care.

Isaiah 53:3

This High Priest of ours understands our weaknesses, for he faced all of the same testings we do, yet he did not sin. 16 So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive his mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it most.

Hebrews 4:15-16

We read the prophecy about Jesus in Isaiah, he experiences abuse, pain, rejection, etc. And we are reminded in Hebrews that He's able to understand our pain and our weaknesses. He knows what we go through and what our children have gone through. We see that Jesus took our side to give us love, grace and mercy.

We pray that God gives each of us in the life of a child or teenager with a difficult background, a willing and loving heart and mind to meet them where they are and help them move forward from there.

Philippians 1:6 reminds us that He started the good work in us and He will finish it and perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus. That includes adults and children. Knowing this we can move forward with confidence in His promises, He will not leave us where He found us. He walks with us and will not give up on us.

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