

Helping Children Communicate about Emotions

I am lucky to have two sisters that I am close with. However, close doesn't always mean we see eye to eye. Last week my sister and I were disagreeing about politics. My sister made a comment that I took very personally. I was so upset I couldn't even finish the disagreement. Later that night I called my sister back and told her how surprised I was that I was unable to talk while feeling so upset.

I see similar reactions in my young children, aged 3 and 6, when they are fighting. The six-year old is taller and thinks faster than her younger brother. When they are fighting over a toy she can get her own way by putting it out of his reach. My three-year old's response is to either hit his sister or start screaming. I catch myself telling them to "use your words" but the reminder on its own doesn't actually help them to do so.

When emotions run high communication is difficult - for both children and adults. When parents teach their children the language and skills to manage emotions, children grow into individuals who have better relationships at school, at home and at work.

Here are a few tips to help your children communicate about emotions:

Help toddlers learn the names of emotions (happy, sad, mad, tired, and scared). Talk about your own emotions and the emotions of characters in books and on TV.

Help children learn to regulate their own emotions . Show them how to take a few moments to breathe when emotions run high and how to come back when they are feeling calmer.

Give children the words instead of telling them to "use your words." When you see your child expressing himself by hitting or using other unacceptable behaviours, tell him what he could say instead. For example, you can say "Scott tell Suzie how you feel. Say 'when you put the bear where I can't reach it I feel mad. I want a turn.'"

Teach your children simple phrases that help them talk about emotions. For example "I don't like that" and "please do something different" are very useful during conflict. Older pre-schoolers and elementary school age children are very capable of explaining their feelings with the formula of "when you _____ I feel _____"

Calmly coaching children to communicate in times of high emotion and modelling these skills yourself can help children become successful communicators. These valuable communication skills help children become good problem-solvers and feel more confident about their relationships with others.

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Date: April 30, 2013

