

Children Learn What They Live

feature

BY ALLISON DAVIS MAXON, LMFT

Children learn what they live. This includes anger, hostility and aggression. The primary method of early learning is imitation, according to “The Essential Piaget” by Howard Gruber and J. Jacques Voneche in the late 70s. Children imitate what they see, what they hear, and what they experience. They typically do not do what they are told to do, but rather, do what they are shown to do.

Emotions are contagious; it’s easy to “catch” an emotion. One of the most important developmental tasks a child needs to learn when they are young is how to modulate and/or regulate their internal distress. They need to learn how to return to a biological state of calm after a distressing event. This is no easy task for a young child who is hearing the word “no” about a hundred times a day and an even more difficult task for a child who has suffered through attachment disruptions, neglect or trauma. When we really stop and think about a child’s day-to-day experience from their perspective, we realize how many stressors and frustrations they encounter. One of the primary tasks in the early years of a child’s development is learning self-regulation and coping strategies that allow them to manage their impulses effectively. Not all stressors are negative, in fact, these daily stressors are great opportunities for a child to practice the skills and competencies that later become the coping strategies and resiliencies he or she will need later in life. Have empathy for your child as they encounter life’s daily frustrations and stressors.

WHAT TO DO WITH BIG FEELINGS AND EMOTIONS?

When children suffer a significant loss through divorce, death or adoption they will experience a myriad of overwhelming and intense feelings. What is most important

during this time of crisis for the child is that they are not suffering alone. It is imperative that parents and caregivers help to model for children what to do with BIG feelings. Have a family rule that no one in the family does their emotional pain alone. Letting children know that when they are feeling really sad, hurt, scared or angry — that they should come to you with those BIG feelings. We cannot make those intense feelings go away — but our BIG emotions always feel better when they are shared with people we trust and love. These BIG feelings can quickly overwhelm little bodies and minds. Having a family rule that cues children that BIG feelings will occur and what to do when they are overwhelmed with these BIG emotions will help them feel more secure.

Parents should model healthy ways to share grief, loss and emotional pain. For example, when our beloved dog died of old age we were all heartbroken. We wanted to help ensure that all of our children had an outlet for their grief. Our family gathered around a large poster board to make our beloved dog a goodbye card together. We put all of our favorite photos of her on it and wrote our favorite memories, drew pictures and shared our feelings of sadness and pain. This began the grieving process for all of us and most importantly gave permission to our children to have all of their feelings, especially the BIG sad and angry ones, while giving them an outlet to express them.

Sorrow shared is halved while joy shared is doubled. — Swedish proverb

This is why it is important for us parents and caregivers to model the actions and behaviors we want to see in our children. If we want children to be able to express their feelings in a pro-social way, we will have to model for them what that looks like. If we

want our children to “think” before they act, we have to model what that looks like. In every situation, each of us has an unlimited number of choices and options regarding our own behavior. Thinking through those options before we act on impulse is wise as it allows us to use our knowledge from learned experience. This is exactly what we want our children to do before they act impulsively based on anger, frustration or temptation. This is an especially important skill during adolescence when many teens face peer pressure and temptation. Thinking through our impulses is a learned skill.

BEING OK WITH MISTAKES: THEIRS AND OURS!

Parenting does not mean that we have to be perfect and never show any negative emotion, such as anger and frustration. In fact, it is quite the opposite. Your child needs you to express all of your emotions — not just the warm fuzzy ones, so he or she can see how it’s done. The difference when we are modeling increased emotional intelligence is that parents are not just impulsively reacting to external stressors, they are able to model healthy ways to manage their own emotional distress.

A parent with increased emotional intelligence might say, “Mom is frustrated right now. I’m going to take a few minutes to calm down before we talk about how we’re going to solve this problem.” With increased emotional intelligence, we begin to see and understand that most of our emotional reactions are the result of our own internal perceptions and interpretations. So instead of saying, “you make me so mad,” we would be correct in saying, “I make myself so mad when I perceive or think about . . .” The golden rule when modeling healthy coping strategies to your child is to be mindful that we, as parents, are always teaching through



our own emotional reactions and responses. It is not just “what we say” to our children that is important, but the emotion we are conveying through our actions and behaviors that is most impactful.

NOTHING IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN THE PARENT-CHILD ATTACHMENT RELATIONSHIP

If you want your child to value relationships and learn how to create and sustain meaningful, loving human connections — you are their most important teacher. Parents are a child’s first and most important emotional teachers. The primary way a child learns to navigate and express intense or BIG emotions is in the intimate cauldron of the family. Children learn what they live. The primary method of this early learning is imitation. When children have parents who can easily find joy and laughter they will learn how to quickly recover from a

stressful event. When children have parents that can effectively express and manage their own feelings, children learn increased emotional intelligence. There is a growing body of research indicating that social and emotional skills (emotional intelligence) may be even more critical to life success than one’s intellectual ability (IQ). And if you want to be let in on a little secret about how to increase your child’s emotional intelligence — make sure you are playing with them every day. Interactive play strengthens every aspect of a child’s social, emotional and cognitive development.

“Play is the work of children.” — Anna Freud 🌸

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