



**SHOW
ME YOUR
MAD
FACE**

Teaching
Children
to Feel Angry
without
Losing Control

BOYS  TOWN®
Press

Connie J. Schnoes, Ph.D.

Show Me Your Mad Face

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SECTION I

ANGRY

CHILDREN

CHAPTER 1

CHILDREN and EMOTIONS

Happy ... Sad ... Mad

These are just a few words people might use when asked to think of some emotions. Often, emotions like happiness, excitement, and cheerfulness are thought of as “positive emotions,” while emotions like anger, sadness, and fear are considered “negative emotions.” This kind of labeling suggests that some emotions are good, right, and acceptable to experience and express, while others are wrong, bad, and unacceptable to feel or express.

Thinking about emotions as positive or negative, right or wrong, or good or bad sets children up for a series of problems. Children might think that it is right to feel positive or good emotions and wrong to feel negative or bad emotions. Parents can reinforce this message and not even know it. For example, many parents work hard to make sure their children don’t feel or experience negative emotions. Parents use strategies like distracting children from something that may upset them, consoling kids who become upset when they don’t get their way, or appeasing tantrums by giving children what they want. At times, parents will do almost anything to calm, quiet, or cheer up their child. The problem when parents do this is that children learn that feeling and showing unpleasant emotions is unacceptable and makes others feel uncomfortable. Children also learn that showing these kinds of emotions can get them what they want – a tantrum gets them candy in the checkout lane at the grocery store, crying about the food they’ve been served gets them a preferred food, or expressing sadness about having to go to bed leads to staying up later.

Another problem with responding to emotions as negative or bad is the decrease in opportunities for children to experience and learn how to better express unpleasant emotions like anger, sadness, worry, frustration, fear, anxiety, grief, guilt, jealousy, and others. When parents and other adults work to prevent or quickly eliminate these kinds of emotional experiences for children, they don’t learn how to effectively and independently manage these emotions. As a result, children don’t learn how to “self-calm” or “self-soothe.” Instead, they rely on others to do this for them.

Another difficulty that may result from emotions being labeled bad or wrong is the negative impact it has on a child’s self-perception. For example, a child might think, “If I feel angry and angry is bad, then I am bad.” Conversely, a child might also think, “If I feel happy and happy is good, then I am good.” Is this kind of thinking logical? Perhaps. Is it accurate? Not even close.

It is important for children to learn that all feelings are okay and that what is important is how they are expressed. I recently worked with a mother and her two young sons following their father’s unexpected death. As the mother shared information about this, her eyes filled with tears and her voice quivered. Her older eight-year-old son quickly

said, “Mommy, don’t cry.” The mother tried to stop the tears, thinking this would be best for the boy. I spoke with her and her son about crying being normal and healthy, and that it is okay to cry when we are sad and even sometimes when we are happy. The mother’s crying made the boy feel uncomfortable and there is nothing wrong or bad about that either. We all have to learn how to be okay with our own sad feelings as well as the sad feelings of others.

One of the first things I teach children and teenagers (in different ways) is that they don’t get to choose how they are going to feel. They don’t get to decide that they will never feel angry, sad, or worried again. Kids often come to our Clinic with this kind of goal or expectation. Once that faulty expectation is cleared up, we discuss what they do get to decide: How they express their feelings and what they will do with their feelings. So, if a child is angry, she gets to choose if she will yell and hit or if she will walk away and cool down.

When discussing emotions with kids, I keep the words “positive” and “negative” – and other words that label emotions as good or bad or right or wrong – out of my descriptions and discussions of emotions. Instead, I emphasize that all emotions are part of the human experience and that they help us live life more fully. For example, we wouldn’t know what it’s like to be happy if we never felt sad. Or, we wouldn’t know what it’s like to feel confident or proud if we didn’t experience fear or embarrassment.

Feelings are the experience of emotions. Do we like to feel happy? Sure we do. Would we rather feel confident and relaxed than apprehensive and tense? Of course we would. It’s just that working to never feel certain emotions is unrealistic and goes against human nature. That’s why it’s important for kids to learn that they are going to experience and feel a wide range of emotions, sometimes on a daily basis and certainly over a lifetime.

Emotions at Different Ages

Emotions serve different purposes for children at different developmental stages. When we hear an **infant** cry, we might instantly decide he or she is sad or mad. But infants aren’t expressing emotions; instead, they are expressing discomfort from being hungry, having a wet diaper, an upset stomach, or gas, feeling cold or hot, being tired, or being in pain. When infants get physically uncomfortable, they lack the words to express their discomfort and are incapable of doing anything but crying about it. They need parents and other adults to determine and address their needs.

Similarly, smiles from infants are not expressions of happiness. Instead, they are expressions of physical comfort. Smiles and crying produce very different responses from adults in the infant’s world. Generally, crying results in holding, bouncing, changing, feeding, or burping, while smiling results in cooing, talking, holding, and smiling from adults.

During “toddlerhood,” children learn words and statements like “I love you” and “I hate you.” They begin to use such phrases in situations where they are experiencing emotions, and they get reactions from the adults around them. Toddlers don’t yet

understand what it means to “hate” or “love;” instead, they’ve heard the words and are trying them out in their own way. Parents are quick to assign the full meaning of these words and statements to their toddlers’ intentions. In reality, toddlers don’t have a clue what their words really mean. They are simply “trying them on” and seeing what happens. For example, saying “I love you” likely leads to hugs, smiles, and warm words in return from adults. Saying “I hate you” likely results in frowns, lectures, or adults telling the toddler their feelings are hurt. Both reactions are reinforcing and toddlers figure out what to continue to say and not say in the future. Ultimately, they are learning new ways to express their feelings of happiness, anger, and upset.

Once toddlers have expressed an emotion, they move on quickly. Due to their developmental stage, toddlers don’t have the cognitive capacity to harbor feelings toward others. They simply go forward like nothing ever happened, because when the emotion and situation it was attached to is over, it’s over. For example, when a parent drops a toddler or preschooler off at daycare or preschool and the child cries, the upset is typically over within minutes of the parent leaving. And the child doesn’t keep thinking about the upset all day. Actually, the child later likely won’t even remember crying that morning. Parents, however, often feel upset over their child’s outburst for hours, if not days, weeks, or even years.

School-age children begin to develop a sense of the wide range of emotions they can experience. They are increasingly aware that others are forming impressions of them and their behavior. Like younger children, when an experience is over for school-age children, it is over and they move on. For example, when children feel mad, they are mad in the moment, and then they move on to whatever is next. Children have the ability to let go of emotions quickly, while adults tend to remember things and hold grudges.

It often seems as if teenagers tend to express their feelings of happiness, joy, and excitement with their friends, while saving and expressing feelings of anger, annoyance, and sadness with their parents. Adolescence also is a time when teens begin to discover creative ways to express their feelings through dress, hairstyles, make-up, music, writing, and drawing. In addition, teenagers identify with their emotions and with others who appear to experience emotions similarly.

Adolescence is a time when emotions begin to define the person rather than the person defining the emotions. It also is a time when the belief that emotions are “negative” or “positive” becomes a conscious way of thinking about emotions. Some might think “If I feel bad, I am bad,” and this thinking can manifest itself in visible ways in their words and actions. For example, acts of self-harm like burning or superficial cutting are sometimes acts of self-punishment. A teen might be upset due to having made a mistake and self-harm is a way to punish and track his or her failures. Or, a teen might identify with a certain group, like “emo” or “goth,” and begin to dress and act in accordance with others who identify with the group. Now, the teen isn’t feeling sad or depressed, they are acting or behaving like they are sad or depressed.

Many teenagers think that something must be wrong with them if they feel sad, angry, anxious, jealous, or experience some other unpleasant feeling. As a psychologist, my goal

is to help teenagers know that there isn't anything wrong with them or the various emotions they experience and feel. It's important to help them understand how this kind of thinking only makes them feel worse. And it also makes it more difficult for them to feel happy, confident, comfortable, grateful, and other more pleasant emotions.

What You Can Do

Your child models your behavior in all sorts of ways by watching what you do and say. And that includes how you manage your emotions. Many parents try to shield their child from unpleasant or difficult emotions (sadness, anger, frustration) they might be experiencing. Parents don't want their child to experience these unhappy emotions. However, this just results in lost opportunities for your child to learn from you. There's no better teaching opportunity for your child than watching you effectively handle difficult or unpleasant emotions by choosing to remain calm and/or optimistic. For example, when a loved one dies, it is okay (and even good) for children to see their parents cry in sadness over their loss. Or, when a parent gets cut off in traffic, it's powerful for a child to hear his or her parent say something like, "It really irritates me when people don't look before changing lanes," rather than yelling at and gesturing to the other driver. Or, when a teen comes home late, instead of quarrelling and dishing out negative consequences right then and there, a parent might instead say, "I am glad you are home safe. We will talk about the consequences for you being late in the morning. I love you. Good night."

Children often see poor examples of how to manage emotions. Some kids see parents or other adults yell, hit, drink alcohol, abuse drugs, or engage in other damaging behaviors when faced with challenging emotions. The danger here is that these children are likely to do and say the same things when faced with similar emotions. That's why it's important for you to always remember that your actions have an enormous impact and influence on your children and how they will react and behave.

Besides good modeling, there are other things you can do to help your child effectively manage his or her emotions, including:

- Accept that your child will experience all emotions and encourage him or her to experience them. Pay attention to your child and offer empathy for the emotions you see your child experiencing. For example, you might say things like: "You seem excited about your date." "You have been studying hard for your test and sound nervous about how you will do." "It's okay to be sad about your best friend moving away."
- Take an inventory of the emotions you are comfortable with your children experiencing and expressing and the emotions you work to have children avoid feeling, or don't want them to feel. For example, do you try to prevent your child from having tantrums? Or, what do you do when your teenager cries?
- Start small and increase your comfort level with the various emotions your child experiences. For example, if it's easier for you to let your child be upset about something at home instead of in public, deal with the issue or situation at home. Or, if

you are able to let your teen work through frustration on his own but you feel compelled to step in when he is angry, then start by letting him deal with frustration on his own. The next time he shows signs of frustration pay attention, offer empathy, and praise his ability to handle it calmly when he does.

- Show empathy to your child by saying things like, “You seem frustrated” or “It’s hard when you feel angry.”
- Offer encouragement and suggestions for managing emotions. For example, you might say this to a child who is angry: “You are upset, but you’re doing a great job of keeping your voice calm.” Or, for the child who is frustrated, you might say, “I can see you are frustrated with your homework, but you are continuing to work hard to try and figure it out.”

Ultimately, it is up to you to accept that it’s okay for your children to feel and experience all emotions. Your job is to teach them effective ways to express and manage their emotions.

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