

Teaching Your Child Emotional Agility

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It's hard to see a child unhappy. Whether a child is crying over the death of a pet or the popping of a balloon, our instinct is to make it better, fast.

That's where too many parents get it wrong, says the psychologist Susan David, author of the book "Emotional Agility." Helping a child feel happy again may offer immediate relief for parent and child, but it doesn't help a child in the long term.

"How children navigate their emotional world is critical to lifelong success," she said.

Research shows that when teachers help preschoolers learn to manage their feelings in the classroom, those children become better problem solvers when faced with an emotional situation, and are better able to engage in learning tasks. In teenagers, "emotional intelligence," or the ability to recognize and manage emotions, is associated with an increased ability to cope with stressful situations and greater self-esteem. Some research suggests that a lack of emotional intelligence can be used to predict symptoms of depression and anxiety.

Emotional skills, said Dr. David, are the bedrock of qualities like grit and resilience. But instead of allowing a child to fully experience a negative emotion, parents often respond with what Dr. David describes as emotional helicoptering.

"We step into the child's emotional space," she said, with our platitudes, advice and ideas. Many common parental strategies, like minimizing either the emotion or the underlying problem or rushing to the rescue, fail to help a child learn how to help herself.

Dr. David offers four practical steps for helping a child go through, rather than around, a negative emotion and emerge ready to keep going — feel it, show it, label it, watch it go.

Feel It. While it may seem obvious to feel emotions, many families focus on pushing away negative emotions. "When we're saying 'don't be sad, don't be angry, don't be jealous, don't be selfish,' we're not coming to the child in the reality of her emotion," she said. "Validate and see your child as a sentient person who has her own emotional world."

Show It. Similarly, many families have what Dr. David calls "display rules" around emotions — there are those it is acceptable to show, and those that must be hidden. "We see expressions like 'boys don't cry' and 'we don't do anger here,' or 'brush it off,'" she said. "We do it with very good intentions, but we are teaching that emotions are to be feared."

Label It. Labeling emotions, Dr. David said, is a critical skill set for children.

"We need to learn to recognize stress versus anger or disappointment," she said. Even very young children can consider whether they're mad or sad, or angry or anxious or scared. "Labeling emotions is also at the core of our ability to empathize. Ask 'How do you think so-and-so is feeling? What does their face tell you?'"

As children get older, she adds, we can talk more about emotional complexities. "We can be simultaneously excited and anxious and frustrated, and we also need to learn to recognize that in other people," she said.

Watch It Go. Even the hardest emotions don't last forever. Dr. David suggests helping your child to notice that. "Sadness, anger, frustration — these things have value, but they also pass. They're transient, and we are bigger than they are. Say, 'This is what sadness feels like. This is what it feels like after it passes. This is what I did that helped it pass.'"

We can also help children to remember that we don't necessarily feel the same emotion every time we have a similar experience. The high dive is scariest the first time. We might feel a lot of anxiety at one party, or in one science class, but have a different experience the next time.

"We're very good, as humans, at creating these stories around emotions," Dr. David said. "'I'm not good at making friends. I can't do math.' Those are feelings and fears, not fixed states. People and things change."

Finally, she said, help your child plan for experiencing the emotion again. "Ask, 'Who do you want to be in this situation?'" she said. "What's important to you about this?" **Children feel stronger as they begin to learn that it's not how they feel, but how they respond to the feeling, that counts.**