



Sharing your children's emotions



Sharing the emotions of one's children is not an easy task. It involves knowing the emotional process and the neuroscientific fundamentals of the emotional process, learning certain patterns of interaction with one's children and working on one's own emotional world as parents. These three aspects are outlined in this paper.



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Empathic understanding of the inner world of one's children is crucial for emotional accompaniment in upbringing, which we believe to be the most important aspect of parent-child relationships. John Gottman, a distinguished child psychologist, has studied the various assumptions parents make about emotion and parenthood, finding that children who had parents with a positive approach to understanding and validating emotions functioned much better in diverse areas than children with parents who tended to ignore their emotions (GOTTMAN, 1997). These studies found that when parents brought up their 5-year-old children with a philosophy of emotion coaching, 3 years later, such children had better social skills, lower levels of stress (measured in specific urine hormones), higher achievement in mathematics and literacy, lower cardiac rates and fewer infections and colds than the children of parents not emotionally involved.

However, sharing the emotions of one's children is not an easy task. It involves knowing the emotional process and the neuroscientific fundamentals of the emotional process, learning certain patterns of interaction with one's children and working on one's own emotional world as parents. These three aspects are outlined in this paper.

The emotional process in childhood

Before more practical considerations, it is helpful for parents to understand certain characteristics of emotional functioning in childhood. Firstly, emotions are a very efficient means of communication, with which children communicate their desires, intentions, and perspectives and interpretations of the world around them. This communication occurs long before they can articulate words, through crying, facial expressions, body language, etc. Emotions are therefore a valuable source of information for parents.

On the other hand, children are very labile and easily activated. They suffer many emotional changes and this often



leads them to fatigue, boredom or frustration. Children need help from parents, teachers and educators to understand and manage their inner world. The human species is one of the species with the most dependent and helpless offspring. Also, children are at the developmental stage of greatest neuronal plasticity.

It is curious to note how parents are very interested in their children's emotional reactions before they can talk, interpreting their moaning, gurgling and crying. The non-verbal channel is the only accessible one, and yet, with the emergence of language in the child, interest diminishes. Why does interest in the emotions of children decline? Generally, there is a culturally widespread philosophy for emotional management based on the avoidance of emotions. The first author of this article has undergone international training in many countries of diverse cultures and has found that emotional avoidance is a widespread cultural element. We believe that we can achieve the child's obedience largely through reasoning and argumentation, but this is not possible due the structure of the brain itself. Most



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of the brain is not obedient; it does not respond to commands or rational orders. It is formed not to obey. Emotions and moods are part of human functioning and cannot be avoided or totally and voluntarily suppressed.

But parents want their children to stop being babies, to control their emotions. Maturity and adulthood are conceived as dominance over the emotional world. Parents want their children to be strong. But the true strength that endures in the long run results from the integration of reason and emotion, not the control of emotion through reason. Seeing the world through the child's eyes helps the child to feel less isolated and more protected. Ignoring children's feelings does not make them disappear or remedy them. On the contrary, children's negative feelings change when they can talk about them, articulate them, and feel

understood and comforted by the reassurance and attention of their parents. Children then see their parents as allies in the challenge of making sense of their inner and outer world and can turn to them more often for support.

Children need to learn from their parents and teachers how to deal with their own emotions as the precious resources they are. And the fact is that psychological life begins with affection and emotion. We experience the world through feelings and are motivated by the desire for certain feelings. At the same time, experiencing emotions and talking about them are two separate processes of our brain. As adults, we need to create meaning from what we feel; the same is true of children and they need to be guided in that process. The brain structures responsible for modulating and making sense of emotion are waiting to be aroused by social interaction, especially with parents. It is precisely this process that leads to better socialization and strength, delays gratification and builds solid values. Sharing children's emotions prevents them from running away from their negative feelings, becoming distracted and expressing themselves in a way that is contrary to what they really feel.

Although the ability to delay an action is inherently human, separating ourselves from spontaneity is dangerously

alienating. Being purely rational denies us access to a sophisticated source of emotional knowledge that prepares us for action and helps us solve problems and make decisions (DAMASIO, 1994). Excessive control of emotions usually leads to the opposite extreme, to the possibility of emotional collapse due to disproportionate emotional control. And the fact is that emotional control usually fails when the accumulation of feelings becomes too much. In addition, emotional experience that is not revealed to others does not grow and is not differentiated in socially appropriate ways. Left to simmer in their own juice, emotions can become twisted, painful and contorted. This happens for example with unresolved anger, which, when held back, is bottled up and turns into desires for revenge. Sharing emotions helps bring feelings into the light of day, where they can develop socially constructive expressions.



Pay attention to, understand and transform your children’s emotions

Emotional wisdom arises when the following processes are developed: greater

awareness of emotions, greater empathy towards one’s own emotions and those of others, giving meaning to one’s own emotion by consciously symbolizing and reflecting on it, increasing emotional regulation and the ability to calm oneself and move flexibly from one emotional state to another. To transmit this emotional wisdom to their children, parents can follow the 5 steps we illustrate below. These

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steps can be taught to parents in psycho-educational groups, parenting school, etc. When the emotion appears in your children, the recommendation is to apply each of these steps sequentially in the following order to facilitate the subsequent process. We present them below as an invitation to parents.

1. Be aware of the child's emotional cues

Take notice not only of the more evident signs such as crying from sadness or noisy forms of communicating discomfort, but of low-intensity signals. It is necessary to pay attention to non-verbal signals or subtle verbal signs of deception, loneliness, impotence and abandonment. In the case of anger, do not take notice only of temper tantrums, but also irritation and resentment. Also be aware if the child is embarrassed or afraid. The case of fear requires special mention: being too attentive to the signs of fear can actually increase the anxiety of the child. Also ignoring the signs when they appear, or ridiculing them (be a big boy/girl) creates shame about being afraid and complicates the emotional process. There are signs of fear that must be perceived: the child having difficulty sleeping, asking for water frequently, or coming to your room with some excuse or another...

2. Consider your child's emotion as an opportunity for intimacy and growth

Emotions are a great opportunity to build up intimacy with your child, which usually entails sharing experiences that hurt both of you. There is nothing more valuable than sharing the feeling of pain; it is a very real opportunity to feel a close connection with your children. As a parent, being able to relieve the sadness will fill you with satisfaction and gratitude. Do not be frightened by your child's sadness. Do not avoid your own sadness. If you do, your child will also avoid it. One exception: when children grow up and enter adolescence, they begin to become more independent of their parents and form their own identity. Now, the teenager's sadness can be shared only if you are explicitly invited because this is the time of development when their identity, strength and competence is at stake and if we get too close or expose them to their own weakness without permission, it can be disastrous; they will withdraw from our contact and end up feeling emotionally damaged. Intimacy in anger is created by teaching them how to handle it. Their anger is not something toxic that must be buried. Fear also creates intimacy if considered with realism (without ignoring it or exaggerating it). If we just say "it's nothing, don't be scared", we are not acknowledging the underlying need for security.

3. Validate the emotion

It is vital to validate sadness, because it is hard enough just to feel it without exacerbating it with feelings of inadequacy for doing so. We create shame by judging sadness (try to avoid: "how old are you? I didn't know you were still such a cry baby", "but there's nothing wrong..."). We validate the emotion by saying something like this: "What a shame that X didn't work out for you." Look for ways to understand sadness and validate it.

To validate anger you will also need to feel comfortable with your own anger and its expression. To be angry means "I am offended"; so, find out what offences or injustices your child has undergone, analyse them and express their reasons for being angry, even when the anger is directed at you.

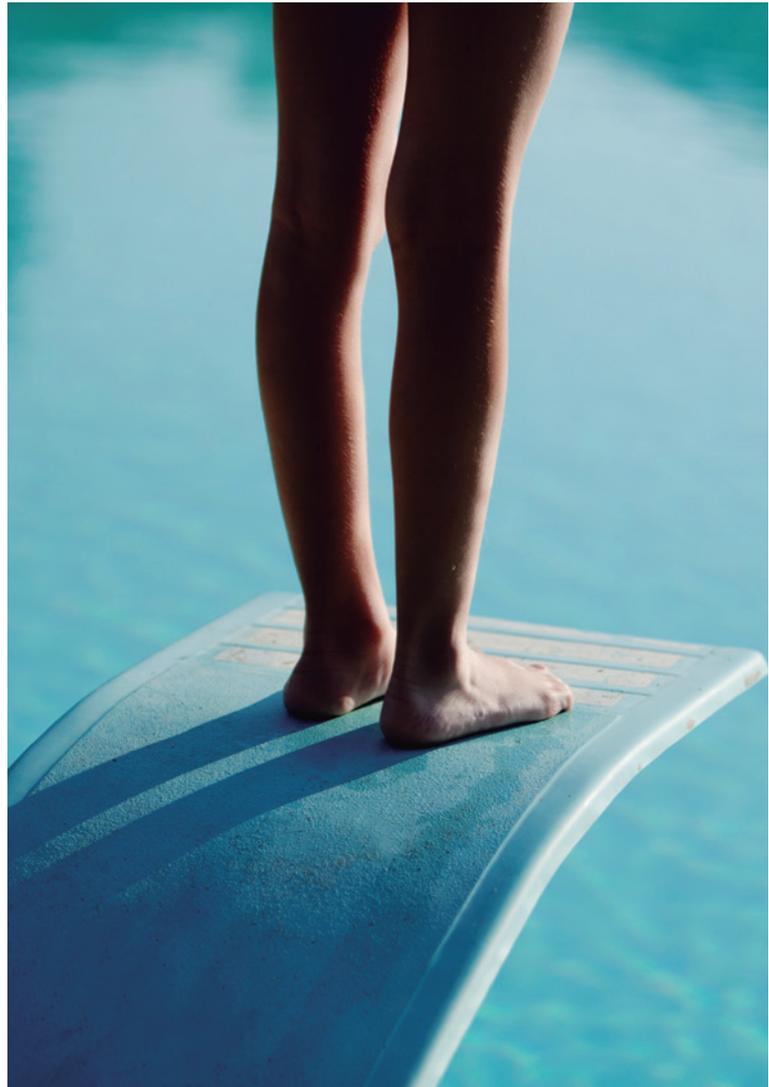
In the case of fear, even with the best of intentions we usually end up humiliating our children when they feel it. It is easy for parents to feel amused and laugh when their children are frightened. Laughing at them or saying "don't be silly" is very humiliating. Children's fears are valid, not stupid. When they feel them to be validated, they feel they are not alone in their fears. Validating fear is very important, because this emotion needs a reassuring adult to calm it.

Acknowledge and normalize embarrassment. These expressions help: "It's horrible to think that other people are making fun of you", "people feel bad when they are insulted...", "I remember when...".

4. Help label the emotion

Offer labels to see if they are useful or use the labels offered by the child. Labelling is crucial for children to understand themselves and others. We label the emotion directly: "John is sad, he's crying." "You feel very angry." "What are you afraid of?" "Yes, you're afraid of that clown." "Are you afraid of the dark and the noises from outside?" "You want to hide away, become invisible, it's shameful...".

An exception: it is important to note if the child is deliberately feigning sadness or another emotion to achieve something



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and, if that is the case, it is better to label the goal rather than the emotion ("John wants a sweet" rather than "John is sad").

5. Finally, help solve the problem

If necessary, set limits as the last step of the process. Doing so in a flexible way, without imposing them is more effective. In this example, with a 3-year-old girl, the



previous steps are followed to finally help solve the problem as a last step: "Ana is crying because the building blocks have fallen over. It's made her so sad that she just wants to cry. Mummy also gets sad when things don't turn out the way she wants (Ana is still crying). You don't want the blocks to fall over. When we are sad, we cry a little, and then we dry our tears. Very good (Ana stops crying and looks back at the blocks). Well, let's see if we can stop these silly blocks falling over. Let's try putting the big block at the bottom this time..."

Helping to find solutions is also a way of helping to confront and anticipate the situations that produce the emotion, see the needs, and the strategies to address it. In the case of fear, confronting it in small steps—empathically and validating the emotion—proves to be very useful. It is not always appropriate to focus on

the direct objective the child is seeking (sometimes they may want to sleep with their parents, not stay at a birthday party...), but creatively offer alternative solutions from the connection achieved in the previous steps.

In the case of embarrassment, it is very useful to teach the child to anticipate the situations that produce it (for example: "It is better to ask to go to the toilet than try to hold back the need to poo. It's hard to ask, but it's better that way"). Helping the child to overcome their embarrassment is basically helping them to realize that faults are acceptable and that they do not make the child look any smaller to you or others.

Managing your own emotions as parents

The biggest challenge for one's own emotional intelligence is the challenge of being a parent. If anyone had described to us the depth of the emotions, especially the difficult ones, which we would feel as parents, we would have thought they were exaggerating. Being a father or mother arouses many expected feelings—tenderness, love, connection, worry—but also some unexpected ones: powerlessness, despair, fury, fear, anxiety, beyond anything we have experienced previously, beyond anything we may have imagined. Sadness—deeper and more profound than we have ever experienced before—also emerges. Sadness about the wounds of our children we cannot heal, about their disappointments we cannot prevent, about their leaving us, which we cannot and are unable to prevent.

Children are a mirror of their parents' own emotions. Making a clear distinction between their perception of what they experience and what one experiences as a parent is really demanding. We discover a lot about ourselves as parents. We sometimes manage to perceive and understand what they experience, but sometimes our emotional experiences are so intense that they blur the separation and we mistake our own feelings with those of our children. At other times, we

will think they are suffering when in fact they are not and we will feel our own pain through them. All parents have a similar experience, and yet there is a conspiracy of silence and there is no permission or space to share. We need to talk about it. Discussing how we over-identify with our children and are overwhelmed by their pain is critical.

Another aspect to be aware of and work on, along with over-identification with our children's emotions, is the excessive reactivity to our children's emotions that we tend to experience as parents. Sometimes, parents feel threatened by their fits of rage, humiliated by their criticism, hurt by their separation, in need of their children's attention, etc. The intensity and frequency of these emotional reactions in parents decrease their ability to share their children's emotions. On some of these occasions, parents lose control of their reactions. It is very important to accept these experiences, name them and transform them. Anger is one of the most complicated emotions in parenthood. It is crucial to experiencing and acknowledging it, but also to control it so that we do not become overwhelmed or find ourselves trapped in spirals of anger and later guilt. Constructively expressing anger is essential and many parents would benefit greatly from guidelines for doing so properly. Sometimes, it would be very useful for parents to see children as they see other adults –as sentient, sensitive beings– and apply the same rules of interaction they apply to other people. On the other hand, children are at the same time



the people who most forgive and most blame their parents. Almost no one would tolerate our anger or our negligence as our children do. But we need to promote relationships of connection and love, based on a deep understanding of the emotions of our children, if we do not want the anger and distance between children and parents to persist.

We are emotional beings for a good reason. Emotions are part of human intelligence and the separation between emotion and reason, and between the inside and the outside, must be cured in a new cultural development, in which integration between body and mind is fomented in schools and other institutions, and especially in homes, the place where the most important emotional lessons are learned •



 Spanish version

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 **To learn more**

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