



TAKE HOME SKILL: CREATING SPACE FOR ALL EMOTIONS

"Your emotions make you human. Even the unpleasant ones have a purpose. Don't lock them away. If you ignore them, they just get louder and angrier."

—Sabaa Tahir

OVERVIEW

A quick guide for parents and caregivers to encourage their children to verbalize and discuss their feelings and emotions, thereby increasing their secure attachment.

PLANNING FOR IT

WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- When your child is experiencing strong emotions, such as frustration or sadness

TIME REQUIRED

- ≤ 15 minutes

LEVEL

- PreK/Lower Elementary
- Upper Elementary

MATERIALS

- N/A

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Students will:

- Recognize and identify the emotions they are experiencing
- Broaden their emotion vocabulary
- Understand how to express their feelings and emotions
- Understand that their emotions and feelings are valid

SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-awareness
- Self-management

HOW TO DO IT

REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

For parents/caregivers: Take a moment to think about the last time you felt strong emotions. How were you able to recognize what you were feeling? How did you verbalize or express this? Did you feel that your emotions were valid?

INSTRUCTIONS

As parents and caregivers, we might be inclined to distract or redirect our children away from negative or uncomfortable feelings. However, this is not always the best strategy. Research on attachment – the unique loving bond between children and their caregivers – suggests that a key part of developing secure and loving relationships is spending time with your children to support their experiences with their emotions.

Discussing your children’s emotions with them can strengthen your relationship with your children.

Here are some steps you can take with your children to encourage them to talk about their emotions:

HEIGHTEN AWARENESS

- When helping your children recognize their emotions, show curiosity about their experience rather than imposing feelings on them.
- For instance, say, “I’m wondering if you’re upset?” rather than saying, “I can see you’re upset”.
- Be humble and inquisitive. This shows your children that you acknowledge that their emotional experience is personal and that you are open to understanding them.

NAME IT

- After encouraging your children to talk about what they are feeling and experiencing, take a moment to reflect on what they’ve told you and offer a possible name for the emotion.

- For example, you can say, “It sounds like you’re feeling sad,” or “It sounds like you’re frustrated”.
- By giving them the opportunity to name their emotions and put their internal experiences into words, you are helping them cultivate a bigger emotion vocabulary and show them that expression is one way to regulate difficult and uncomfortable feelings.

EXPLORE TOGETHER

- Validate your children’s emotional experience. This can be as simple as saying, “That sounds like it would be frustrating.”
- Help them make sense of any aspects of their experience that are confusing to them, such as mixed emotions. For example, kids can feel happy a friend won an award and, at the same time, sad because they wanted the award.
- Show your children you understand by matching their emotions with your voice, face, and touch. You can share a smile if your child is excited or hold their hand if they are nervous. These non-verbal expressions can help your children recognize and make sense of their own emotions.

REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

Do you notice if your child is expressing their emotions and feelings more often? Are they able to recognize and name the emotion they are experiencing? Do you notice any changes in your child when they are able to talk more openly about their own emotions?

THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

A [2014 manual](#) explores concepts used in the Circle of Security intervention, a program for cultivating secure attachments between parents and children. It provides parents a roadmap to observe, identify, reflect on, and respond to their children’s core needs, including a secure base from which to explore the world and a safe haven to return to for comfort. The authors offer guidance on how to provide comfort to children by helping them process and understand their own emotions.

In a [study](#), child-caregiver pairs participated in the Circle of Security intervention. The results showed that the intervention was effective in changing children’s attachment style from non-secure to secure attachments.

A [case study](#) found that the Circle of Security intervention previously used with caregiver-child pairs up to preschool age can also be effective with older children.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Securely attached children tend to have higher self-esteem, show better self-control, and perform better in school. Children who experience more loving relationships with their parents therefore tend to be more compassionate and helpful toward others later in life.

Beyond interpersonal relationships, love has lasting benefits for our health and growth—while people who grow up without loving bonds may experience immune system dysfunction and chronic illness.

Children develop secure attachments when they benefit from a caregiver’s enduring love--so much that they “have confidence in the possibility of goodness.” In other words, because they have received consistent care, warmth, and sensitivity in the past, they believe that others will respond to their vulnerability with compassion in the future.

In addition, parents who are attuned to their children model caring behavior that their children can embrace and imitate. When parents are responsive to their children’s emotions, children learn to become more aware of their own feelings.

The ability to be agile with their emotions allows children to better support others who are in distress because they don’t become overwhelmed by other people’s pain. With a greater understanding of emotions, securely attached children can empathize more skillfully and, in turn, show care, love, and compassion to others.

SOURCE

Robert S. Marvin, Ph.D., University of Virginia School of Medicine