

From: Dr Paul Holinger's Parenting Place

(www.paulholinger.com)

September 2011, Newsletter

The Three Keys to Dealing with Feelings

Last month, we discussed how all human beings are born with built-in feelings. In infancy, there are various responses to stimuli, which later become our feelings and then our more complex emotional life. The question is: How do we use this information? That is, can understanding the embryology of feelings help us with infant and child development?

The answer is a resounding yes! And it turns out that understanding feelings can help us not only with infants and toddlers, but with adolescents and adults as well.

There are three basic keys.

Key #1:

Allow Full, Reasonable Expression of All Feelings

The real goal here is communication – communication between the child and the outside world, and also helping the child communicate with herself and understand her own feelings better.

The technical term for promoting the expression of feeling is “minimize affect inhibition.” What does this mean? It refers to the importance of allowing your children to express their feelings. Again, behaviors are caused by feelings. In order to understand your child's behavior, it is necessary to understand what he or she is feeling.

One of the worst maxims to emerge prior to the 20th century work on infant and child development was “Children are to be seen and not heard.” This is completely contrary to enhancing communication between children and parents and ultimately helping the child to socialize.

Infants and preverbal children will express their feelings through facial expressions, vocalizations, and bodily movements. Sometimes they will gurgle, smile, gleefully squeal, and jump around excitedly – as they express interest and enjoyment. They will also bite, kick, and scream sometimes; these behaviors also reflect feelings – usually distress and anger.

Some of these expressions require help in socialization — in other words, some form of modulation or containment by the parent. “I can see you are excited, but let's turn down the volume and use inside voice please.” “I know you are angry, but no biting please — maybe punch this pillow if you really need to let off some steam.”

One tries to allow the expression of all feelings – whether positive or negative. Furthermore, even with preverbal children, one keeps translating back to

feelings and putting the feelings to words for the child — i.e., labeling the feelings. “You felt scared when that dog came running up.” “You are really interested in that mushroom.”

The trick is allowing the expressions both positive feelings (interest and enjoyment) and negative feelings (distress, anger, fear, shame, disgust, dissmell) — and putting all of those into words for the child.

What about the verbal child, the toddler? Same thing, except there are more likely to be words involved. “I really love this sandwich, Mommy!” “Stop that – I no like you!”

Toddlers will express their feelings in both actions and words. The actions may be similar to those of the preverbal child: screaming excitedly, yelling, biting, and so on. The words may be very primitive: hate, no, stop, and the like.

The task is twofold. First, allow the expression of whatever the feelings are, helping with modulation and regulation depending on the circumstances. Second, translate the actions and words into the feelings — and the feelings into words.

Key #2:

Focus on the Feelings of Interest and Enjoyment

The technical term for this is “maximize positive affects.” The idea is this: we want to focus on and enhance the child’s feelings of curiosity (interest) and enjoyment.

Let’s start with interest, or curiosity. We so often want to impose our knowledge and rules onto our children — after all, we don’t want them to make the same mistakes we did! But the child’s development is helped as much by our understanding what he or she is interested in. If we can help the child identify and value what he is intrigued with, then there is a much better chance that he’ll find the profession and spouse and hobbies which are right for him.

Enjoyment is related to interest, so we want the child smiling and laughing and playing. Why? Because not only will she have a sense of what she likes and does not like — very important for the right choices in life — but her internal world will tend more toward optimism and hope and successful striving than fear and shame and anger.

The feelings of interest and enjoyment — and surprise, if the surprise is not marked by distress — make up what we call play. Play is very important to children, and an attitude of playfulness — of fun and optimism — can do wonders for happiness and success.

Key #3:

Attend to the Negative Feelings

“Attend to the negative feelings” is what one tries to do with children, adolescents, and adults. With an infant, if your baby is crying, you would try to figure out what was wrong and do something about it. The technical phrase for

this is “minimize negative affects (causes, not expressions).”

There are several negative feelings: distress, anger, fear, shame, disgust, and dissmell. Life will provide plenty of hard knocks — so one is always running into the negative feelings. With young children, it makes sense to attend to the causes of these negative feelings and help them to go away. In this way, the child gains the idea that “help is on the way” and she can regulate her tension better. She can gradually internalize this notion that things will get better — this soothing leads to self-soothing.

So whether the child is distressed, or angry (think excessive distress), scared, or humiliated, try to attenuate the causes. Again, the goal is not to protect your child from all frustration and pain — that can’t be done! One does, however, want to protect the child from trauma.

It is especially helpful to try to avoid fear and shame as motivators — in others words, don’t try to scare or shame the child into behavioral compliance. If the situation is dangerous — the hot stove — you can explain the dangers to your child without terrorizing him. The problem with using shame is that it erodes self-esteem. Using positive feelings — interest and enjoyment through rewards and praise — is much better for the child’s psychological development than using fear and shame.