

Strengthening the Relationship Bonds

The school holidays are just around the corner and this will mean increased time with our children providing a golden opportunity to not only model behaviours we are looking for in our children but to work to build even stronger bonds than we have already. Two ways we can do this is by “catching” our kids being good and also helping them to manage their strong emotions without adding shame.

Catching Kids Being Good

Every day children do good things that are easily overlooked – playing well with a sibling, being polite, doing something for someone else, asking permission to do something or go somewhere with friends, playing, reading, entertaining themselves. Perhaps not wanting to disrupt a peaceful time, we sometimes fail to notice, let alone fail to give praise for compliance and general good behaviour. Negative behaviour usually invites an immediate reaction from us however positive behaviour is sometimes ignored. Our School Wide Positive Behaviour Program recommends six positive reactions to a ratio of one negative one as do parenting programs such as 1 2 3 Magic and Emotion Coaching and the Engaging Adolescent Program and raisingchildren.net.au. We know the 6:1 ratio keeps things in balance remembering that if children have a choice only between no attention or negative attention they will seek negative attention.

Be mindful of looking for positive behaviour which can be rewarded through complimentary feedback, increases in privileges and the like. Take a moment to be specific, “I like the way you and your sister are playing” or “I love it when you text me when you are out shopping with your friends.” If you feel you could praise your child/ren more, select a few sections of the day where you intentionally focus on looking for the good things your kids are doing. Consistent, immediate and specific praise for good behaviour is a powerful and effective way to show your approval. Use verbal praise and physical touch most often and mix this with tangible rewards such as one to one time with you, treats, outings and special privileges. You know of course, what your child appreciates most! As you consistently “catch” your child/ren being good you'll find yourself being more positive around him or her, and in time you should notice your child using more positive behaviours as a result.

Helping Children Manage Strong Emotions

Learning to manage strong emotions is an essential life skill. It requires learning to understand one's own emotions and those of others and then to make good choices. Parents and key adults in children's lives are their “emotion coaches.” The first step to coping with negative emotions is to figure out what your child is feeling, convey that all feelings are okay and that the most difficult feelings such as anger, jealousy, fear are opportunities to learn to be strong and resilient. The first step in helping a child when feeling a strong emotion is to empathise by communicating to them (by use of one or more statements not a question) how they appear to be feeling, then labelling and validating the feeling. For example, “Anna, I can see you are angry and frustrated.” Anna may well correct you if you have not pinpointed the exact feeling but that is okay as you have conveyed to her already that you are listening and trying to understand. The larger the child's emotional vocabulary is, the easier it is to label emotions for them and in return for them to explain their feelings to you. Some good sites for feelings language are:

<http://childrenscenter.sa.ucsb.edu/cmsmedia/documents/parentsupport/feelingwords.pdf>

<http://kidsactivities.about.com/od/LifeSkills/qt/Feelings-Words-From-A-To-Z-The-Abcs-Of-Emotion.htm>

<http://quizlet.com/6633810/childrens-list-of-feeling-words-flash-cards/>

You will most probably notice the more you join with your child in how they are feeling by naming and validating the feeling, the calmer they are likely to become. When calm, there is more likelihood the child is able to work on making a good choice around what to do with the feeling so that the outcome is acceptable by others around them. If the negative feelings have escalated into bad behaviour then it is necessary to set a limit by imposing a consequence such as a loss of privilege or time out. Setting limits is vitally important to help kids learn how to behave well even in the face of strong, negative emotions. For example, "It is okay to feel angry and frustrated, but it is never okay to throw things or call people names."

The next step is to invite more information about what led up to the feeling by continuing to name what you see. "Anna what happened just before you started calling Sarah names?" "You felt embarrassed and betrayed when she found and read your diary." These continued attempts to name the feelings bring about attunement between you. The goal is to put her in touch with his/her emotions, good or bad. Then help the child to problem solve and make plans to help prevent it from happening again and for what to do next time she is feeling frustrated, angry, embarrassed or betrayed. Helping your child with some options can work but not until they are invited to come up with their own ideas as when they are calm, it is likely the frontal cortex is able to work hard and problem solve as the part of the brain which feels emotion (amygdala) is not feeling as threatened as it was. Anna may well decide that talking to mum or dad or another significant adult is a better solution than hitting or calling her sister names. That's all there is to it! First label and validate the emotions you see. Second, deal with misbehaviour if you need to and finally help your child solve the problem.

Enjoy all the extra time you will have with your loved ones and please email us ideas for topics you are interested in us researching and reporting on! We are keen to meet your parenting needs!

Gai Bath and Andrea Maver

SMC Counsellors

gbath@smc.tas.edu.au

amaver@smc.tas.edu.au