



Emotional Flooding— Using Empathy to Help Babies Manage Strong Emotions

Leaving a parking garage, I [Linda] put my ticket into the machine. The attendant announced, “Nine dollars.” I said, “There must be a mistake. I validated it before I left the mall so it should be one dollar.” He said, “You must have done it wrong. It’s nine dollars.” I protested, “No, I did it right. I want to see a manager!” I felt my blood begin to boil. I was already late, and I didn’t have time for this. The manager came down, and I tried to calm myself to explain how I had validated the ticket. He said, “Nobody else is having this problem. It says nine dollars, so you have to pay.” I totally lost control of my emotions. I hollered at him as I paid and threw the change on the floor of my car!

During this encounter I felt emotionally flooded. Suddenly I was unable to manage my emotions and was just reacting (rather poorly) to my feelings.

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Illustration by Melanie Hope Greenberg.



ALL OF US CAN THINK OF TIMES when we have been overwhelmed by our emotions. Now let’s consider the young children we care for and think about some of their challenging behavior. Often young children’s challenging behavior may be the result of emotional flooding.

How emotions are processed

Most of the time, as adults, we can manage our emotions by processing them through the “thinking brain”—the cerebral cortex. This part of our brain is responsible for self-control and judgment. In children the “thinking brain” is not fully developed. Children get emotionally flooded much more easily than adults because they process their experiences through their “emotional brain”—the limbic system. This part of the brain handles emotional responding and pleasure

seeking (Institute for Early Childhood Education and Research n.d.). Young children have not yet fully developed the skill of stopping and thinking through possible actions and their consequences. Teachers can provide support that can guide children in learning the skills used to regulate or manage their emotions.

Empathy as a teaching strategy

It might be helpful to think about what helps us manage our strong emotions as adults. One of the first things that can help adults and children to calm down is for someone to empathize with them. When we empathize with someone, we validate their feelings.

In the opening scenario, one of the passengers in the car said, “Linda, I can’t believe that he didn’t believe you!” Hearing her say that immediately helped Linda feel better about the situation. She felt someone understood what she was feeling.

Where does empathy come from?

One of the ways empathy develops is in the context of relationships. A patient, caring adult who understands child development and knows a particular child and his or her preferences can help that child learn about emotions and how to regulate them. One of the best ways to learn about individual children and development is through observation.

When we notice a child becoming overwhelmed, we can observe what is happening. Observation helps us anticipate and perhaps minimize potentially challenging situations. We can observe the environment, the child, and our practice to see what might be contributing to the child's loss of emotional control.

Next, we can reflect and ask ourselves what the child is trying to tell us. All behavior has meaning. With very young children it can be difficult to figure out what that meaning is. We may ask ourselves questions such as, Are certain transitions harder for this child than others? In what areas of the room or time of day do these situations arise most often? Consulting with the family about what they have observed can provide insight into the meaning of the behavior. Once we have a better understanding of what is happening and why, we can empathize with the child's feelings (Foulds et al. 2008).

Helping children cope with their strong emotions is a first step in helping them become self-regulated. The ability to regulate our emotions is an important task to master at any age!

Putting empathy into practice

When toddlers are overwhelmed, pediatrician Harvey Karp (2004) says it is best for our response to match their intensity and limited language. When Sammy, age 20 months, is squirming

on the changing table saying, "NO, NO, NO," his teacher can match that intensity and language by saying, "NO, NO, I hear you. NO, NO, you don't want me to change your diaper! You want to play!" It can be surprising how quickly some toddlers calm down when teachers use this approach. Once toddlers see that an adult understands their feelings and message, they often are ready to move on.

Other toddlers may respond better to a teacher whispering what she thinks they are feeling. A teacher can whisper, "I know you feel angry. I know you didn't want to stop playing to have your diaper changed. You want to play." Some toddlers respond well to the adult's calm presence because it can help them contain their strong emotions.

Our objective as educators is to use the strategy that is most effective in helping a particular young child feel heard and understood. Sometimes, empathy is all that is needed for a child to move on and for order to resume.

THINK ABOUT IT

Think about times when you have been overwhelmed by strong emotions. What helped you gain control and think things through? What strategies do you use to empathize with an overwhelmed infant or toddler? How do you decide which approach will meet the needs of an individual child?

TRY IT

Next time you observe a young child becoming emotionally flooded, try empathizing with her. Depending on what you know about her, you can match her intensity or talk softly to her. Notice how she reacts. The important point is to help the child know you understand her feelings.

References

- Foulds, B., L. Eggbeer, A. Hunter, & S. Petersen. 2008. *Individualized intervention with infants and toddlers: Determining the meaning of behavior and developing appropriate responses. Infant Toddler Module 3*. Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning. www.vanderbilt.edu/csefel/inftodd/mod3/mod3_script.pdf
- The Institute for Early Childhood Education and Research. N.d. Brain development and early childhood education: What is the connection? *Research Into Practice* 6. http://earlychildhood.educ.ubc.ca/Publications/Research_Into_PracticeBrain-1.pdf
- Karp, H. 2004. *Happiest toddler on the block*. New York: Bantam Dell.

Additional resources

- Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning—www.vanderbilt.edu/csefel/inftodd.html
- Developmental Behavioral Pediatrics Online—www.dbpeds.org
- Devereux Early Childhood Initiative for Infants and Toddlers—www.devereux.org/site/PageServer?pagename=deci_it
- Technical Assistance Center on Social Emotional Intervention for Young Children—<http://challengingbehavior.fmhi.usf.edu>

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