



HELPING CHILDREN COPE WITH BIG EMOTIONS

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AGENDA

- Identifying *typical* parenting responses to children who are struggling with their emotions and behaviours
 - Understanding the *emotionally focussed* approach, which is a *therapeutic* intervention
 - Practicing the skills together - demonstrations and group work
 - Exploring why anxiety is so prevalent and how we can help children and families to cope effectively
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SCENARIO I

- Jake, age 10. Loves wearing shorts.
 - Personality: strong-willed, determined, not very flexible.
 - Scenario: it's October, temperature is hovering around 8 degrees in the morning. Jake is at the door getting his coat on and wearing shorts.
 - You tell Jake to get pants on and he refuses.
 - “I am NOT wearing pants. I'm comfortable in shorts and you can't make me”.
 - Meltdown is approaching quickly.
 - What do you say?
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SCENARIO 2

- Lucy, age 8.
 - Personality: anxious, cries often and easily.
 - Mother is at the end of her rope with Lucy's meltdowns every day when she gets off the school bus. She is often irritable and angry with her mother.
 - Today, Lucy bursts into tears as she watches two of the neighbourhood girls go home together for a playdate.
 - She throws her bag down, attracting stares from other parents, and starts whining and crying when Mom asks her how her day was.
 - She says, "It's not fair! I don't get a playdate!"
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ROLE PLAY

- How, as a parent, do we respond to such situations?
 - Demonstration of typical parenting responses to both Jake and Lucy's scenarios.
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OUR TYPICAL RESPONSE MAY BE:

- To try to use logic or reason
 - To minimize concerns
 - To offer rewards or threaten consequences
 - To respond with frustration and anger
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TODAY, LET'S TALK ABOUT WHAT WORKS FOR KIDS WHO:

- Have an emotionally sensitive temperament
 - Are anxious
 - Are dealing with loss, change, grief
 - Have ADHD, ASD, are gifted or have other exceptionalities that reflect difficulty regulating emotions and may result in challenging behaviours.
 - Yet, this approach has benefits for ALL children
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HOW WE FEEL AS PARENTS:



- Frustrated
 - Sad
 - Angry
 - Out of control
 - Embarrassed/ ashamed
 - Sometimes, love but not “like”
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THE PROBLEM

- Behaviours are a reflection of their inability to cope with their emotions.
 - Responding to emotional distress by explaining, redirecting, offering rewards or threatening does not tackle the underlying need.
 - We need to get to the real issue and help children feel connected, secure and calm.
 - Then, once they are emotionally regulated, we are able to problem solve and collaborate with them.
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HOW DOES EMPATHY IMPACT CHILD DEVELOPMENT?

- * If child is responded to with empathy, they learn that their feelings must be valid.
 - * If the person who is most supposed to understand them sends message they are not supposed to feel how they actually do feel, they lose confidence in themselves too.
 - * This “mirror neuron” system begins in infancy.
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ATTACHMENT AND BRAIN DEVELOPMENT

- Babies learn how the world works through interactions with primary caregivers.
 - They coo, we coo back. They cry, we soothe and respond.
 - “Happy hormones” are released, bonding occurs.
 - This is how children come to understand the world around them and themselves.
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- There is a shift that occurs when children become toddlers - our expectations of children often change.
 - This can be confusing for children who are more sensitive and anxious.
 - *It is never too late.*
 - Brain is neuroplastic - can learn new responses into adulthood.
 - Every time we listen, provide empathy, talk *WITH*, not *AT*, we create conditions for learning and growth.
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*“Empathy is...
communicating
that incredibly
healing message of,
‘You’re not alone.’”*

-Brené Brown

Example: Lucy and bus stop scenario

- If Lucy's Mom says, "Put the tears away, it's not a big deal. You can have a playdate another day", what message does that send?
 - It's better to suppress her feelings, nobody understands anyway
 - Her feelings are not valid, she *shouldn't* feel this way
 - If her parent, who she trusts the most and looks to for confirmation she is doing the right thing, doesn't accept her feelings, how can she trust herself?
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ADVANTAGES OF EMOTIONALLY FOCUSSED APPROACH

- Develop a closer **relationship** with your child
 - Stay **calmer** and in control as a parent
 - Helps both child and parents to better **regulate their emotions**
 - As a parent, you **model how to display empathy** and compassion
 - Results in **less behavioural difficulties**
 - Builds emotional **resilience**
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“ Empathy is the most important part of being a parent; in truth, it is the most important part of being human.”

—Jennifer Kolari, *Connected Parenting*



Empathy fuels
connection; sympathy
drives disconnection.

Brené Brown

quote fancy

THE TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

STEP 1: FULLY ENGAGE



- Put aside distractions
 - No screens! They interfere with connection.
 - Make eye contact, gently touch, lean in, crouch down.
 - Be sure your child sees that you are paying attention.
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STEP 2: MATCH EMOTION WITH AFFECT AND BODY LANGUAGE

- We want to be in control and regulating our own emotions, avoid a completely neutral or flat affect that leads to children feeling you are disconnected.
 - Use affect and body language to portray that you are listening and understanding (or at least trying to understand!) what they feel.
 - Ex: frown to show frustration, let your mouth fall open and gasp to display your surprise, throw your hands up to show you feel their despair or anger.
 - Time to use your best drama skills!
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STEP 3: ACTIVE LISTENING



- If they say how they feel, echo it back to them (in their words or your own).
 - If they can't put their feelings into words, try to do it for them.
 - Repeat their words multiple times if needed.
 - It is very soothing and affirming for them to hear you say out loud what they are experiencing.
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- “It’s so hard when
 - “You feel so disappointed because you were”
 - “You love wearing shorts! Why do you have to switch to pants anyway? That is really annoying.”
 - “Those friends didn’t invite you to their playdate. That hurts your feelings.”
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CAUTION!

- Avoid the instinct to “fix” it.
 - Don’t offer solutions or give advice (that comes later when child feels connected and soothed).
 - Not the time to tell your own stories or provide reassurance (but later that can be helpful).
 - Stay present, show empathy, validate. Tolerate their emotions.
 - *Slow down*
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STEP 4: MIRRORING

- When you combine connection, use of affect and body language and active listening, you are *mirroring* their emotions.
 - Be careful to not create distance. For example, “I can see that you are angry”.
 - Instead, think of doing a running commentary, as if you are speaking for them. “Oh, it is really terrible when that happens! It’s so frustrating.”
 - Mirroring models how to listen, be empathetic and show compassion for others - all critical skills for children to develop.
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Example - emotions regarding a peer issue:

- Try to avoid: “*It sounds like you think* those girls are leaving you out.”
 - Why? Implies that the child feels that way, but perhaps should not have those feelings. We want to avoid any judgement or implication their feelings are not 100% valid.
 - Instead, try: “ Oh, sweetie, they are supposed to be your best friends and they didn’t include you in the playdate. You feel really hurt.”
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YEAH BUT

- IT's OK to have hesitations and be doubtful!
 - If you feel burnt out and the bond with your child is frayed, this approach may seem impossible.
 - Attachment is a dynamic process ... be gentle and compassionate towards yourself if the relationship is a difficult one.
 - You may need to put on an award winning acting performance to change the pattern. Seek support from other family members if possible.
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“The children we least feel like doing this with, those
are the ones that need it the most. ”

“Ruthless compassion”

—Jennifer Kolari

PRACTICE THE APPROACH



- USE EITHER OF THE CASE EXAMPLES, OR CHOOSE ONE OF YOUR OWN
- IN GROUPS, HAVE SOMEONE BE THE CHILD, SOMEONE BE THE PARENT, OTHER GROUP MEMBERS PROVIDE SUPPORT AND HINTS

ANXIETY

- Anxiety among children is at an all time high
 - Often present in children with ADHD, ASD, giftedness, etc.
 - Why is anxiety more prevalent?
 - Technology/ Social media
 - Undermining of parental authority in our culture/ peer-oriented culture
 - loss of critical rituals, family time, fast pace of modern life
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- Anxiety does not always present as worrying or nervousness.
 - Many anxious kids present as angry and irritable.
 - They try to control their environment, so they may seem stubborn and inflexible.
 - As parents, we can model coping skills and help build their resilience.
 - Therapy and evidence-based programs such as FRIENDS for Life can be helpful additional supports for families.
 - Emotionally focussed approach is a key piece of the puzzle.
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HOW ELSE CAN WE SUPPORT?

- Establish your authority and portray confidence.
 - Gordon Neufeld: “You don’t have to have all the answers, you ARE the answer.”
 - Establish family time that is technology-free.
 - Put family relationships before peers or extra-curricular activities.
 - Focus on connection: use of “baby talk”, bedtime rituals, etc.
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Thank you!

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