

January 2013

Moving Children Toward Happiness: Self-Regulation and Empathy

by Teacher Teresa Layden

Personal Background: As my oldest daughter entered toddlerhood, I became more and more interested in learning how to help her achieve a sense of “happiness,” particularly as she reached adulthood. When my second daughter arrived a couple of years later, I was more at ease with my ability to steer both girls in the right direction, but I was far from certain my efforts would ultimately prove beneficial or lead to positive outcomes. It’s probably no small wonder that I began thinking about all of this at the exact point in their development when their emotional range was rapidly emerging —as toddlers, their emotions could sometimes swing from placid to fury in a matter of minutes.

My overwhelming concern with the future of my daughters’ emotional health dovetailed with a similar interest in my students’ well-being. As an educator, I was perennially on the alert for skills one could help lay the foundation for or curriculum one could devise that might lead an individual to an overall feeling of satisfaction with life and one’s placement within their community. Not naïve enough to think anyone can throw a few lessons into a classroom and those who pass through its portal will end up feeling some sort of long lasting contentment, I nonetheless believe it’s a worthwhile endeavor to help children strive toward some sort of state of peace with both themselves and those around them. Fortunately, (yet!) twenty years after my first daughter was born, parents and educators are perhaps better equipped to do so. In part, this is because we can now turn to increasingly sophisticated research and brain studies for guidance. Drawing on the work of John Medina in *Brain Rules* and *Brain Rules for Babies*, there are a number of interesting discoveries relevant to this discussion.

The Long and the Short of It Is... In fact, studies overwhelmingly and consistently show that the best predictor for happiness is the quality of one’s relationships with others. By middle age, friendship and committed relationships surpass every other factor in predicting happiness.



Working backwards from this profoundly resonant, yet overwhelmingly complex finding, how can we help children in our care develop tools to connect strongly with other people? Medina believes the answer lies in helping children learn to regulate their emotions and demonstrate empathy.

Helping Children Regulate Their Emotions and Develop Empathy: As those of us familiar with young children know, these are no easy tasks. Medina aptly describes the emotional roller coaster of young children thus, “Until they acquire language, what’s in store for young children as their tiny emotion-heavy brains stitch themselves together is lots of confusion. This struggle is especially poignant in the early toddler years. Young children may not be aware of emotions they are experiencing. They may not yet understand the socially correct way to communicate them. The result is that your little one may act in anger when he is actually sad, or she may just become grumpy for no apparent reason. Sometimes a single event will induce a mixture of emotions. These emotions and their attendant feelings can feel so big and so out of control that the kids become frightened on top of it, which only amplifies the effect.” (*Brain Rules for Baby*, p. 171)

At the risk of oversimplifying the data, one of the best things adults can do to help children regulate their emotions is to pay attention to each child’s emotional patterns. By paying attention, we should then be better able to predict a child’s reaction to a variety of situations and be better able to lend support accordingly. Further, staying in touch with a child’s psychological interior allows us to keep pace with emotional shifts as children’s brains develop and change. We can thus continue to support each child’s emotional development for months (as teachers) or years (as parents) to come.

Another thing we can do is to help children label their emotions. Labeling and identifying emotions can take some of the fear out of experiencing them and allows for a degree of regulation, mastery, and control. For a young child, experiencing emotions without an understanding of them can be very scary. Giving emotions a name helps make them more manageable. As primary caregivers our goals are threefold: to help children know they are experiencing a certain emotion, to help them accurately identify the emotion, and to help them



recognize the same emotion in others.

Modeling is one of the most effective ways to teach children how to regulate their emotions. As Medina recalls, “I remember trying in vain to open a jar of pickles. My 4-year-old walked in, glanced up at me, and said, “Daddy, you look mad. Are you mad?” “Yep,” I replied. “I can’t get the pickle jar open.” Later that day, I noticed he was getting frustrated building a Lego model. “You look angry, son,” I said. “Are you angry?” He looked at me and said, “Yes. I’m mad. This is my jar of pickles!” (*Brain Rules for Baby*, p. 273)

Medina also includes a more extensive example, which poignantly illustrates his point.

“I don’t like it,” the three-year-old muttered to herself as the guests left. Miserable throughout her older sister’s birthday party, she was now growing angry. “I want Ally’s

doll, not this one!” Her parents had brought her a consolation present, but the strategy went down like a lead balloon. The girl threw her doll to the floor. “Ally’s doll! Ally’s doll!” She began to cry. You can imagine a parent making any of several choices in the face of this bubbling brew.

“You seem sad. Are you sad?” is what the girl’s dad said. The little girl nodded, still angry, too. The dad continued. “I think I know why. You’re sad because Ally’s gotten all the presents. You only got one!” The little girl nodded again. “You want the same number and you can’t have it, and that’s unfair and that makes you sad.” The dad seemed to be pouring it on. “Whenever somebody gets something I want and I don’t, I get sad too.” Silence.

Then the dad said the line most characteristic of a verbalizing parent. “We have a word for that feeling, honey,” he said. Do you want to know what that word is?” She whimpered, “OK.” He held her in his arms. “We call it being jealous. You wanted Ally’s presents, and you couldn’t have them. You were jealous.” She cried softly, but was beginning to calm down. “Jealous she whispered. “Yep,” Dad replied, “and it’s an icky feeling.” “I have been jealous all day,” she replied, nestling into his...arms.” (*Brain Rules for Babies*, p. 206)

By naming the emotion, the adult gives the child the foundation to understand it and respond in an acceptable fashion.

On the path to helping children have strong bonds with other people, not only can we help them regulate their emotions, we can also help them develop a sense of empathy. Regulating emotions helps children attach appropriate behavioral responses to how they feel whereas empathy helps them support others in what they feel. “Along with the ability to regulate emotions, the ability to perceive the needs of another person and respond with empathy plays a huge role in your child’s social competence. Empathy makes good friends. To have empathy your child must cultivate the ability to peer inside the psychological interiors of someone else, accurately comprehend that person’s behavioral reward and punishment systems, and then respond with kindness and understanding. The outward push of empathy helps cement people to each other, providing a long-term stability to their interactions.” (*Brain Rules for Baby*, p. 175) One of the best ways to teach empathy to a child is to be consistently empathetic to that child. This involves recognizing that emotions are reflexive and not judging a child’s feeling a specific emotion. It’s important to acknowledge a child’s feelings even if it’s a feeling we’d like to ignore or make disappear. It also involves setting limits on appropriate responses to emotions—validating the emotion, but not always the choice of behavior that follows. It’s important to have a list of acceptable behaviors (kicking the soft blocks is ok) as well as a list of unacceptable behaviors (kicking your friend is not). Problem situations can then be seen as teachable moments--treat emotional meltdowns in a way that allows your child to take from it something they can emulate in the future.

“Let’s say you are waiting in a long line at the post office with your restless 2-year-old. She announces, “I want a glass of water.” You calmly respond, “Honey, I can’t get you water right now. The drinking fountain is broken. “ She starts to whine. “I want some water!” Her voice cracks. You anticipate what’s coming, and your blood pressure begins to rise. “We’ll have to wait until we get home. There’s no water here,” you say. She retorts, “I want water NOW!” The exchange escalates, in danger of erupting into a very public fight. What now? Here are three tactics you might take:”

- Choose to disregard the child’s feelings and say brusquely. “I said, wait until we get home. There’s no water here. Now be quiet.”
- Anxious about a potential embarrassing meltdown, you condemn your child’s reactions and hiss, “Will you *please* be quiet? Do *not* embarrass me in public.”
- Not knowing what to do, you shrug your shoulders and smile limply as your child takes over. Her emotions reach critical mass, then explode all over your parenting skills...

...Here's what you are supposed to do instead: You acknowledge the child's feelings and empathize. "You're thirsty, aren't you? Getting a big gulp of cold water would feel so good. I wish that drinking fountain was working so I could lift you up and let you drink as much as you wanted." (*Brain Rules for Baby*, p. 214)

In fact, research shows that empathy is a key factor in diminishing strong emotions in the heat of a situation and lessening the chance of their recurring over time. It's important to keep in mind, however, that empathy is not synonymous with agreement, but can make our everyday lives less contentious.



One easy strategy to help instill empathy in children is to ponder what other people are thinking and experiencing. For instance, if you and your child happen to see a mother and her child laughing together you might ask your child what she thinks they might be laughing about. Or if the clerk at the grocery store is impatient when she's checking you out, you could later ask your child why she thinks the clerk might have reacted that way. You could also reflect on situations you and your child experience together and talk about other ways either one of you might have responded.

Full Circle: Now that my daughters are young adults, I still want them to be "happy." After reading more and more about what we know about how people act and how the brain is wired, I now know to talk to them about regulating their emotions, demonstrating empathy for others, and being cognizant about how these traits can help strengthen their connection to others. I tell them I want them to have strong friendships that sustain them and provide a community of support, as they get older. I realize too that it's never too late to learn these lessons for oneself and achieve a state of "happiness" along the way. Being a role model in this instance is well worth the effort!



February 9th: Happy 3rd Birthday, Alder!

(It appears that we have only one February birthday ... my apologies if I've missed anyone!)

Upcoming Events:

- January 15th: Parent Meeting

- January 21st: Martin Luther King, Jr. Day--No school!
- January 23rd: Field Trip to Children's Theatre--No School!
- February 1st: King Street normal day (SPS no school)
- February 6th: King Street normal day (SPS 2-hour Early Dismissal)
- February 12th: Board Meeting
- February 15th-18th: Mid-Winter Break--No School!
- February 19th: Parent Meeting
- March 6th: King Street normal day (SPS 2-hour Early Dismissal)



- March 12th: Board Meeting
- March 15th: King Street normal day (SPS no school)
- March 19th: Parent Meeting

Don't Forget!

This year the annual **Family Night Out will be on SUNDAY, March 24, 2013**. This event includes dinner, a raffle, music by Recess Monkey, and our silent auction. This year's theme is Rock Band! Come wearing your best rock star ensemble and enjoy this family friendly evening.

Tickets are \$16 for adults, \$8 for kids.

Each family must procure THREE items. Contact your favorite restaurant or business for gift cards and service certificates, or get creative and donate something that uses your own skills. We will send out lists of items procured on a regular basis so families don't approach a business which has already donated an item for our auction.

The Family Night Out is open to the public. Start talking about it now with your friends and family!

Your contributions to the King Street Cooperative Preschool Newsletter are very welcome!

The next edition will come out on January 19th, 2013. Please send articles, pictures, information and ideas to Lissa Munger, ecmunger@gmail.com, by Wednesday, January 13th.