

## May Monthly Message – Children’s Mental Health Awareness Day (5.9.19)

In honor of Children’s Mental Health Awareness Day, May 9<sup>th</sup>, we’d like to draw your attention this month to caring for youth in their hardest moments and how to best support youth in developing positive strategies to manage their big emotions.

“Gentle Parenting” advocate L.R. Knost (2013) noted that **“when little people are overwhelmed by big emotions, it’s our job to share our calm, not join their chaos”** – awesome advice that is often easier said than done. From toddler to teen, it helps to keep in perspective the developmental milestones youth are experiencing in order to calmly navigate temper tantrums and shouting matches. The prefrontal cortex (the part of the brain that regulates emotion and behavior) does not reach full development until age 25, so adjusting our expectations to be more realistic can allow for more compassionate responses and better support their growth by modeling emotional self-regulation (Preston 2019).

We can help youth from an early age identify their triggers that make them less likely to be able to moderate their emotions (such as hunger, sickness, tiredness, hormonal fluctuations), to label and validate their feelings, and cultivate tools for calming down when emotions run high. Developmental psychologist Dr. Soderlund, creator of [www.nurtureandthriveblog.com](http://www.nurtureandthriveblog.com), states that it is our job to coach children through their feelings; she compiled a helpful list of “Emotion-Coaching Phrases” we can use to not only help children reset their emotions, but to help us keep our cool in the moments of tension as well. Below is a summary of Dr. Soderlund’s “10 Emotion-Coaching Phrases”:

- ❖ **It’s okay to be upset – it’s good to let it out.** *Acknowledge and validate how they feel.*
- ❖ **I hear you – I’m here for you – I’ll stay with you.** *The best gift we can give another human is to stay with them in their emotion. “You are upset, let’s sit here for a moment...”*
- ❖ **It’s okay to feel how you feel. It is not okay to \_\_\_\_.** *It isn’t the emotion itself that needs to change, but how they are expressing it – i.e. “It’s okay to be angry, but it’s never okay to hit.”*
- ❖ **How you are feeling right now won’t last forever. It’s okay to feel how you are feeling. It will pass and you will feel better again soon.** *Emotions are big and overpowering – it’s like the whole world is ending (right?). It can lessen the intensity of the emotions with this gentle reminder.*
- ❖ **Let’s take a breath, take a break, sit down, pause for a minute....** *Label emotions and describe how they make you feel: “When I feel upset, I feel like I can’t catch my breath, so I try to breathe slowly...” Acknowledge emotions so that they don’t fester up inside us until they explode.*
- ❖ **You are good and kind.** *“You were angry. You didn’t mean those unkind words about your brother. Sometimes we say things we don’t mean when we are mad. You are a kind boy. What do you think would make your brother feel better?”*
- ❖ **I’ll be over here when you need me.** *Sometimes kids escalate their emotions for attention. Are your tactics of validation and acknowledgement backfiring? It may be time to step away. You can still acknowledge their feelings while giving them a chance to self-regulate. Sometimes we all just need some alone time!*
- ❖ **Let’s have a Do-Over!** *Sometimes we all need a chance to reset. “Whoa! This is not the fun we had planned for today! That was not the way to handle that situation, was it? Let’s try it all again – how can we do it better this time?”*
- ❖ **What can I learn from this? What is the lesson in this?** *Teaching our children that there is a lesson when we struggle is so important. Problems that are hard to solve lead to opportunities to learn. It is through our mistakes that we grow. Emotions are not just random things that happen to us – emotions are lessons – emotions are the fabric that connect us to the ones we love.*
- ❖ **You’ll remember next time.** *Failure isn’t permanent – we all have the ability to change. This gives them something positive to focus on, helps resolve their current feelings, and gives a sense of relief and a desire to try next time. “You’ll remember next time to use your words instead of hitting.” If they do remember next time they might even point it out to you: “I remembered, Mama! I used my words!” with their eyes shining with pride. When they do that you know it happened – **they were empowered to change their behavior from within.***

**For local support for your child's mental health needs, please visit the Collaborative Solutions Network's website for information, referral services and more:**  
<http://www.collaborativesolutionsnetwork.org/>

Citations:

Knost, L.R. (2013). *The Gentle Parent: Positive, Practical, Effective Discipline*. U.S.A.: Little Hearts Books, LLC.

Preston, E. (2019, April 4). *The scientific cause of sudden toddler meltdowns*. Retrieved from: <https://medium.com>

Soderlund, A. *10 emotion-coaching phrases to use when your child is upset*. Retrieved from: <https://nurtureandthriveblog.com>

**Monthly Messages are brought to you by the Tompkins County Youth Services Department, a proud partner of The Community Coalition for Healthy Youth.**

If you have further questions or comments about this message or would like information on how to become involved with the Community Coalition for Healthy Youth, please email [bnugent@tompkins-co.org](mailto:bnugent@tompkins-co.org).

