

“Don’t Get So Upset!”

“Don’t Get So UpSeT!”

Help Young Children Manage Their
Feelings by Understanding Your Own

Tamar Jacobson, PhD



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I dedicate this book to Rami Bar Giora, my psychology professor in Jerusalem, who introduced me to Haim Ginott
when I was twenty-two years old,

AND

To my mother, Beryl Kate Salis Liberman, who wrote to me a few years ago:

*I always knew you would be right there,
From your mother who always loved you.*

“Don’t Get So Upset!”

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PREFACE

I look across the sea of faces in the classroom. The students look weary from coursework responsibilities that have piled up at the end of the semester. Many of these young women hold a job while they attend school full time. They plan on becoming teachers of young children. I feel no energy from them today. Everyone looks droopy, speechless, bored, tired—as if they would rather be somewhere else, anywhere but here. My course is about families and early childhood education. Today my topic is “Becoming a Parent.” I ask: “If you get to choose to become a parent—that is, if it doesn’t suddenly happen to you or take you by surprise—what might be the first choice or decision you make?” One young woman with sleek brown hair and clear, bright eyes raises her hand and says, “Who will be my partner?”

People start to sit up in their seats. I go on: “What characteristics would you look for in someone you choose to be a partner in parenting?” Hands shoot up. The young women are alert now. Some even seem to bounce up and down, a little impatient to share:

“Good-looking. Money. Compassionate. Generous. Will work with me as a team. Intelligent. Sense of humor. Responsible. Reliable. Similar morals, ideas, beliefs. Loves children—all children. Spontaneous. Romantic.”

So much to discuss. For example, what does each person mean by *good-looking*? A conversation ensues, and everyone agrees: tall, dark, and handsome. I recommend that they see the movie *Pride and Prejudice* if they are looking for tall, dark, and handsome, and then I become excited as I remember Keira Knightley. “The two actors are so gorgeous, I would not know who to choose!” I muse. Laughter and excitement follow. I wonder out loud, “What does ‘good-looking’ have to do with parenting?” Time is up. We will continue the subject next week. I still want to discuss the expectations, hopes, and dreams of becoming a parent, as well as the challenges. Cultural forces, religious beliefs, influences on our gender identity, support systems, prenatal care, giving birth, post birth adjustment—and all the complexity of becoming a parent—including the guilt that so many people feel as they become parents. Will there be time for it all? Where has the semester gone? The room feels warm with energy as I pack computer and books into my bag. Students are drifting out of the classroom, loudly chatting and laughing. “See you next week!” they call out to me as they leave.

As I walk out to my car, an autumn chill brushes my face gently. The air is clear. I remember sitting in a class thirty-five years ago at the David Yellin College of Education in Jerusalem. Back then we knew it as Seminar Bet Hakerem, one of Israel’s oldest teacher education colleges. Pnina Ezra was my early childhood instructor. She seemed quite old to me at the time. I was twenty-two. I suppose she might have been the age I am now. I smile to myself at that

realization. Pnina taught me to wear a big comfortable smock with large pockets to hold tissues and other necessary early childhood “stuff.” She explained that when children came to hug me I would not need to pull away from their little muddied or painted hands. My clothes would be safely protected by the apron, and that way I could always be available to enfold children in my arms, close to my heart. Pnina had compassion for children. Her subject was pedagogy, the pedagogy of love and acceptance. Sitting in her class at age twenty-two, I heard her tell us that the most important step to becoming a parent is in the choosing of our partner. At the time, I was amazed by what she said—my mind was blown. In those days I bumbled and fumbled my way through life, falling in and out of love with all sorts of people. I had never imagined or considered that one of them might be the father of my child. Indeed, Pnina’s words made me think differently, more carefully about who might be a suitable father of my future children.

My attention returns to the current time. I climb into my car and sit silently for a while. I wonder, “Will my students, like me, remember what we talked about today in thirty-five years’ time?” I smile to myself as I start up the car. It feels good to be a professor. I look forward to seeing everyone next week.

Swami Ji Sivalingam was my yoga teacher many years ago. While we were in the middle of practicing our yoga *asanas* (postures), he would say, “So happy, so joy. This is yoga.” Then, just as he had managed to convince us to maintain a difficult posture, he would call out sharply, “Keep a smiling face!” Oh, how that would make me laugh inside, and I would *feel* the joy all over my contorted body.

He once told me that each time before he started to instruct a yoga class, he would thank his past mentors and teachers. From

time to time I think back to all the people I have considered teachers and mentors, and I silently thank them for their influence. After all, we are touched and affected by all those who wander onto our path, whether they come on purpose or by chance. I especially remember those who were kind and supportive to me, encouraged me in my education and those who inspired me with their work on relationships and young children.

Although my memories of elementary and high school teachers are few, Mr. Tregidgo, my high school English teacher, stands out for me. I do not remember much about the lessons he taught except for learning never to start a sentence with “I.” What I do remember about him, though, was his greeting: whenever he would meet me in the hallway of that old British colonial school of Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), he would wave and smile, and say, “Shalom!” Mr. Tregidgo was not Jewish, but I was. In fact, I was the only Jewish girl in the class. Each time he greeted me in that manner I felt included, important, and worthwhile. His greeting was something personal, just for me. Here it is, more than forty years later, and I still remember him for that.

I first heard Bruce Perry speak at a national conference about five years ago. It was a life-altering experience. Every piece of his talk resonated with my life’s work as an early childhood teacher. The discussion about brain development was extremely exciting, for Perry talked about emotional memory templates and the importance of relationships. Each moment during his presentation became an “Aha!” experience for me, reinforcing and reconfirming everything I have been thinking, feeling, and experiencing about working with young children, their families, and their teachers. And it also helped to explain what I had been uncovering about myself in therapy over the years. I have since heard Bruce Perry speak four or five times, and each time I have the same experience.

He inspires me to continue the work I do and expands my understanding of my own emotional development. It is definitely people like him who remind me how important my work is. Bruce Perry says it is all about relationships.

I must admit that I most likely am not only a teacher but also a mentor for others. The wheel of life spins on, and my awareness of that leads me to think about what sorts of pieces of myself or my life experiences might have served as examples for others searching for their way. We can never really know which action or word spoken to others affects them. Every person's needs are related to where he or she is, at different places in time and experience. But, at the very least, we can offer ourselves generously and openly to others, sharing our most vulnerable selves, and being as authentic and honest as we are able.

Thank you to my son, Gilad Barkan, for having the courage to tell me how he feels, and to my husband, Tom Jacobson, for having the courage to hear how I feel. I am truly blessed to have these two wonderful men in my life. Thank you to Redleaf Press, namely Linda Hein and David Heath, for supporting this book. It is a dream come true, for I have been thinking about emotional development for more than thirty years and wanting to write a book like this for a decade. A special thanks to Deanne Kells, my editor. You understood exactly what I was trying to say and guided me to (in your words) "make the book shine forth in all its glory and give the reader a sense of real actions that might help us all 'follow in Tamar's footsteps,' albeit on our own paths."



INTRODUCTION

This is one aspect of teaching that I hadn't thought of until now—the emotional power teachers have over children.

—COLLEEN, UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT

Too often, caregivers are given the message that there are “correct” emotions to feel; emotions must be controlled or regulated. Language such as “over-attached,” “cares too much,” “don’t get too involved” all suggest that there is a correct amount of emotion. Once we care for someone and care about them, our heart is involved. We cannot measure the caring and concern.

—ENID ELLIOTT

Early Emotional Memories Last Forever

Very early one morning, at the conclusion of a national conference, I shared a taxi to the airport with a colleague, another early childhood teacher educator. We discussed what I would be writing about in my next book. I shared that my topic was how teachers' emotions affect their interactions with children, especially in response to what they consider challenging behaviors. She was silent for a moment and then said reflectively, "I often think that people who work with young children have been emotionally wounded when they were children themselves. It's almost as if they have chosen the profession of early care and education because of that." I thought about what she said and recognized that through the years as a teacher and professor I certainly have learned and come to understand much about my own childhood experiences and inner self through observing and interacting with children and their families.

As part of the ongoing process of exploring my inner life, I have learned to notice patterns of thought or feelings, and when or how they occur, so that I might understand myself better. For example, I have realized that I swing between feelings of being in and out of confidence. Knowing my confidence state is a good barometer for me. It helps me to know how to take on a challenge or survive a difficult day.

Understanding myself certainly enhances and enriches my life. But this is not the only reason I have undertaken this exploration. At one point in my early twenties I realized that my interactions and behaviors with young children could affect them for the rest of their lives. At the time I was reading Haim Ginott's book *Between Parent and Child: New Solutions to Old Problems* (Ginott 1969) for a child psychology course. It was while I was reading about

how it is not good to tease children that I realized teasing had always felt hurtful when I was a child.

While children are playful, it does not mean they are not serious. In fact, their play is serious indeed. They are learning about life through their play, and they take seriously what the significant adults in their lives say to them. They have to—after all, children depend on adults for their survival, emotionally and physically. When we tease young children or use sarcastic humor, they most often believe our words to be true. A child's sense of humor is not yet developed and sophisticated like an adult's. It is crucial to respect children and not to trivialize them with teasing and sarcasm. It is critical to take them seriously by validating and acknowledging their feelings. Children need to know what we really think about them almost as much as they need the air they breathe. They might lead us to believe they understand our humor in order to please us. In fact, our humor is often confusing and sometimes hurtful to children.

As a child I learned to laugh along with my stepfather, mother, and brother when they made fun of me, my ideas, or even people who were important to me, including my father, who did not live with us. It seemed to be the way members of my family expressed love—through teasing and sarcasm. So I laughed along. I also learned to believe that what they were saying was reality. Deep inside, I was hurt and confused. Ginott explains this phenomenon in his book, which I read while studying to become a preschool and kindergarten teacher in Israel. I remember that as I read his words, I wept with relief. I felt validated. More than that, I learned that I was not abnormal for having been hurt and confused by the teasing, which created in me an immediate longing for sincere, authentic, serious loving. Looking back, I realized that my interactions

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as a child with significant adults in my life had affected me for a very long time. I was amazed. It was a revelation! It hit me hard and deep: whatever I would do and say with and to young children could have a profound effect on them. The responsibility became immediately awesome.

So, back in 1970, I began an exploration of my inner life in order to understand why I do what I do so that when I was interacting with young children I could be my most authentic self. The journey never ends. It has been excruciating at times and, at others, exhilarating and revealing. My exploration has made me feel uncomfortable and has occasionally caused members of my family and some of my friends discomfort too. But finding out how I came to be me is not some kind of self-indulgent, navel-gazing, egotistical preoccupation. It is my responsibility as a teacher.

Self-awareness helps me prevent inappropriate actions and reactions. For example, I am inclined to tease children because that is what I experienced as a child. But I am still able to stop myself, put myself in their shoes, and speak clearly and with respect. This is because I am aware that teasing was confusing and hurtful for me and made me feel helpless.

What to Do with Children's Behaviors That Challenge Us

Behavior management, including discipline, seems to be a popular topic these days. More than that, teachers and caregivers seem starved for information about it. In a recent survey of student teachers, in which my university's teacher education department asked how it might improve the student teaching experience, 100 percent of the students replied that they needed more behavior management strategies. Indeed, one of my colleagues says, "It's *all*

about behavior management.” During my workshops and presentations about discipline at conferences and in-service trainings, I have hardly managed to complete the introduction when teachers of young children begin to ask for solutions and answers. They ask me for strategies and prescriptions. They want me to tell them exactly what to do when a child bites, hits, refuses to clean up, answers back, throws a tantrum, or does not follow directions. Many express feeling helpless or frustrated with young children’s behaviors they consider challenging.

Usually I start off a workshop or presentation by asking participants or students to describe how they were disciplined as young children. We write the list of punishments on the board or flipchart and uncover that most of the attendees experienced some kind of pain or humiliation when they were young children. Parents have scolded, slapped, pinched, yelled at, or threatened them—and those were the milder punishments! Many in the audience express resentment from these experiences.

I cannot help but wonder how those earliest memories have affected the very people who will be disciplining children in their care. At a recent in-service training of early childhood teachers, we talked deeply and sincerely about the way we were disciplined and how it affects our behaviors in the classroom. I watched teachers and caregivers as they bared their deepest fears and anxieties, some weeping as they realized how many of these feelings were affecting their classroom management strategies and, more importantly, their sometimes misguided perceptions about children. It was powerful, and I was inspired by their courage. Like many teachers, I want to give children what I never had. For others, their early childhood memories about discipline are satisfactory enough that they want to repeat what they experienced. Clearly, our own emotional development in childhood, or ways we were guided or punished, affects

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how we feel about what to do with children whose behaviors challenge us.

In *The Emotional Development of Young Children: Building an Emotion-Centered Curriculum*, Marilou Hyson describes the dangers of neglecting emotions. After reviewing the research about young children's emotions, she summarizes several points, including that emotions guide and motivate behavior "from infancy throughout life," and that all emotions, whether negative or positive, are important for development. Hyson goes on to say:

"An underlying message of all this research is that emotional development is too important to be left to chance. *Adults, including early childhood professionals, can make the difference, supporting positive development, being alert to possible problems, and intervening early and effectively.*"

(italics mine; Hyson 2004, 9–10)

Ever since beginning my career as a preschool and kindergarten teacher, I have considered the importance of my role in supporting positive emotional development for young children. I wonder how teachers can be effective if they are not in touch with their own emotional development, for our interventions in emotional situations are crucial in supporting children toward acquiring a positive self-identity. Recently, one of my undergraduate students wrote about how she is drawn to children with levels of self-confidence similar to hers as a child:

"When I was in elementary school . . . I always felt that I was not good enough and did not have the slightest bit of self-confidence. Having grown up feeling that way, I vowed

to make sure I would find the ones who have low self-esteem like I did and take them under my wings to show them that there is nothing to fear and that they are capable of many things. Because I still have many doubts and reservations about my abilities, I can detect others who share similar feelings.”

If we are not aware of what frightens or concerns us or causes us anxiety, if we do not know our emotional limitations, we might not be as supportive as we would like to be. We might, in fact, unintentionally shame a child the way we were shamed as children. Therefore I want to emphasize an extra dimension to the concept of behavior management. It is an aspect we need to support our important work of appropriate interventions in emotional situations: self-reflection about what makes us *adults* tick emotionally.

Reflective Practice

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) expects professionals to engage in reflective practice (NAEYC 1993). Teachers are encouraged to cultivate certain specific attitudes toward reflective thinking, such as open-mindedness, wholeheartedness, and responsibility for facing the consequences. There is evidence that reflective practice enhances change in classroom practice. Much of the research about reflective practice looks at teachers' ability to assess a situation and make sense out of the experience. Teachers who reflect on how they feel and why they feel the way they do are in a better position to understand their interactions with others. The idea of self-awareness is discussed as assisting teachers in their classroom practices and personal lives. Teachers have control over the decisions they make, yet without their

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active involvement, autonomy, and reflection, it is difficult to make changes in classroom practice (Jacobson 2003).

Research about the importance of healthy emotional development has confirmed what I have been uncovering about *my own* emotional development and how *I* feel. It has helped me understand how and why I might have struggled with my relationships, professional or personal, these past fifty-eight years or so. Research has especially helped me to understand and improve my relationships with young children, families, and teachers. Throughout this book I share some of these self-uncoverings, in the hope that they will encourage you to embark on your own self-exploration. As we learn more about ourselves, we are able to understand more clearly why we do what we do, especially when faced with children's challenging behaviors. This book will not give you my prescriptions for the best ways to manage children's behaviors. I do discuss interventions *that worked for me* and that might be appropriate for you to use as well. But mostly I recommend that you find your own strategies that fit your comfort level. This will depend on how you were disciplined as a child, what your beliefs are, or what kinds of behaviors cause you discomfort and why. What has worked for me may not necessarily work for you. Our life experiences, earliest childhood memories, ways in which significant adults in our life interacted with us, and problem-solving techniques are likely to be quite different.

Overview of the Book

I begin by discussing some of the research on children's emotional development (chapter 1). Brain researchers explain that emotional memory stored in the brain during the first four or five years of life is un-erasable. The ways in which we interact with young children

affect their future emotional development and how they acquire a self-identity. The literature tells us that meaningful, loving relationships are crucial in young children's emotional development.

Understanding how we feel and why—by taking a look at ourselves—is the theme of the second chapter, where I discuss different kinds of feelings that affect our interactions in emotional situations with children. In chapter 3, I explore feelings related to anger more specifically, because anger causes many people some form of discomfort. In a survey about anger that I conducted in the spring of 2006, teachers in campus children's centers reported feelings of confusion or expressed a fear of being out of control as part of their own anger experiences. In a study about scolding in child care across the United States, Denmark, China, and Japan, Erik Sigsgaard writes about why adults scold children. One of the reasons is simply because the adults themselves were spanked or scolded as children (Sigsgaard 2005). Pre-service teachers and teachers at in-service trainings tell me, time and again, how resentful or angry they still feel, years later, when they recall feeling humiliated while being scolded as young children.

In addition to being affected by intense emotions like anger, our interactions are influenced when we feel empowered. Therefore, in chapter 4, "We Face Our Feelings of Powerlessness," I continue the discussion from "In and Out of Confidence," chapter 4 in my first book, *Confronting Our Discomfort: Clearing the Way for Anti-Bias in Early Childhood* (Jacobson 2003). Classroom management, discipline, and the way we see ourselves controlling our domain are also connected to different power issues. For example, in what ways does the power structure of our profession influence our self-identity? How did we come to choose the profession of early care and education? Put even more simply, how do we empower children when we do not feel powerful or confident ourselves? For

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example, allowing children to speak out or make a stand for themselves can feel inappropriate, even intimidating, when we have difficulties being assertive ourselves.

Having confronted some uncomfortable emotions and discussed some of our inappropriate interventions, I turn in chapter 5 to the question of why we do what we do, as we claim our childhood traumas large and small. This chapter leads us into self-reflection. By creating a type of internal ethnography, or qualitative study of ourselves, which I call “researching the self,” we begin by taking a look at our own emotional history. In doing so, we become aware of what makes us uncomfortable in children’s emotional situations, and we understand how the discipline we received as young children affects our interventions and interactions with behaviors we consider challenging.

As we are repeatedly tested with our responses in emotional situations, we also come to know ourselves more deeply. Once we create a foundation of self, where we are on the road to confronting, understanding, and accepting our own emotions, we are in a better position to think about practical applications of discipline strategies in the classroom. In the sixth chapter, I discuss setting limits, what to do about tantrums, and how to meet our expectations to create safe emotional environments for ourselves as well as the children. I also take a look at the difference between discipline and punishment. By applying strategies that do not humiliate, punish, or scold, we learn, as children and adults, to accept the negative as well as the positive aspects of all our emotions.

In the final chapter, “We Can Change Our Emotional Scripts,” I talk about telling the story of our emotional history. Hyson tells us that children’s emotional development is too important to be left to chance (Hyson 2004). But what about the teachers who are

expected to guide and support children as they develop a positive emotional identity and become socially competent citizens of the world? Bruce Perry emphasizes that we have the choice to develop humane children, starting from their earliest years, by giving them strong, repetitive, positive emotional memories (Perry 2007). How do we do that if we never experienced humane treatment while growing up? The emotional development of *teachers*, therefore, is too important to be left to chance. Indeed, in the late 1950s and the 1960s, teacher educators suggested that:

- teacher preparation should involve a development of awareness about their emotional life;
- human emotional qualities are at the core of teaching;
- and the very behavior of teachers is a product of their emotional self-identity. (Jacobson 2003)

It takes courage to confront our emotions and realize that some of the ways we were treated as children affect how we perceive those behaviors we consider challenging in young children. In many cases it is not so much that a particular child has behavior problems. In fact, often it has to do with how we *perceive* those behaviors in connection with how we remember being treated as young children, or how we observed our peers being managed with similar problems. Indeed, it is all about our relationships with one another.

This book is for you, about you and me—the adults who care for and educate young children. Whether you are a student preparing to become an early childhood teacher, a beginning or veteran teacher of young children, or a teacher educator, this book is intended to help you uncover your own feelings as you try to manage children's behaviors and think about strategies that might work for you. It is meant to serve as a guide for your own self-reflection,

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rather than yet another set of instructions about *the right way to do it*—external strategies or techniques designed to fix children's behavior problems.

Many years ago a friend gave me a poster featuring words written by Haim Ginott, the child psychologist I wrote about earlier, who had influenced me in the early 1970s. I still have these words hanging up in my office. They accompany me as I work with families, children, and their teachers. I give them out to everyone I know, and I share them with you now.

“I've come to a frightening conclusion. I am the decisive element in the classroom. It is my personal approach that creates the climate. It is my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher I possess tremendous power to make a child's life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or humor, hurt or heal. In all situations it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or deescalated and a child humanized or dehumanized.” (Ginott 1972)

Being a teacher of young children is the most powerful profession I know. It comes with an awesome responsibility: it is up to us to offer children different options, new ways to solve problems, models of kindness and compassion, and relationships that will reinforce and develop a strong, positive emotional self-identity. So many times I have looked into the eyes of a child who is angry, bewildered, or frustrated, or who has given up the fight altogether, and I see myself, recognize those feelings, or remember the anxiety from somewhere deep in my own childhood psyche. Have we forgotten so soon that once we were children too?

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CHAPTER ONE

WE CREATE POSITIVE EMOTIONAL ENVIRONMENTS FOR CHILDREN

Our brains are starving for relationships. Our children are starved for relationships. The whole culture is touch deprived—relational deprived.

—BRUCE PERRY

About a year ago, I received an e-mail from a reader of my blog, which I have been writing for the past three years:

“ I’m a parent of a 2-year-old boy and would love to read any books you may have written, essays, articles, speeches—EVERYTHING you have ever said on the topic of early childhood. . . . There are so few approaches to early childhood that [have] basic kindness as a point of departure. I call it, ‘I’m-on-your-side-ness’ and sometimes that

translates into ‘even-if-I-don’t-understand-you-now-I’ll-never-ever-stop-trying-to.’”

Driving back and forth to work, I thought about this e-mail. It occurred to me that the parenting styles that swaddled me as a child were far from kind. Indeed, I do not recall feeling the “I’m-on-your-side-ness” that the writer described, except, perhaps, from my father. He did not live with me, but I visited him every two weeks. He was in his sixties by the time I was five years old, more like a grandfather than a father figure. A gentle, soft-spoken man who expressed delight at my achievements, my father related to my intellectual ability. For example, when I entered high school, he sent me a *Cassell’s Compact French-English English-French Dictionary*, which I have kept to this day. My older siblings were not around me much. My oldest sister left home by the time I was six or seven, and the second-oldest sister was mostly at boarding school and then went away to Europe as soon as she was able. When I was twelve, my brother left Rhodesia for college in England, and my mother gave me a framed photograph of him as a special gift when we returned from the airport. In order to gain acknowledgment and respect from my mother, I learned that my brother was a very important person—someone to be noticed and listened to.

I would have to say that I experienced significant parenting models from a number of people in my family—namely, my mother, stepfather, and older brother. Their styles were similar. They used criticism, sarcasm, teasing, name calling, threatening, ostracizing, and labeling. Their methods included anything from laughing at my developing beliefs, ideas, and emotions to sneering at what I was doing and how I looked. Ironically, both the significant men in my life as I grew up (stepfather and brother) were also those from

whom I longed for acknowledgment the most. Yet, instead, they were both sarcastic and teased me.

As I considered the e-mail from the blog reader, I thought, “How on earth did I learn that basic kindness and I’m-on-your-side-ness are a point of departure for interacting with young children?” I certainly do not practice it on myself. Instead, right up to today, I struggle with reproaching myself scathingly for everything I do, feel, or accomplish—and certainly for how I look. As I look back, I shudder at the thought that I might have treated others, including my own son, like that. And yet, somewhere deep inside me, I know that basic kindness is, most certainly, a point of departure for the way we treat young children. Where, oh where, did it come from? I had to assume that I intuitively learned from the kindness of strangers over and over again. Strangers were always being kind to me: mothers of playmates; school or college teachers over the years; the nuns at the Mater Dei Hospital back in Bulawayo, Rhodesia, where I was born; youth leaders; therapists; friends. The list is endless, yet the people’s qualities are always the same: listening, accepting, validating my emotional experience, giving me their time, telling or showing me love in concrete ways, believing me, giving me permission to express sorrow and anger, allowing and delighting in me just being me.

Many people choose to replicate parenting models even when they are abusive, and some decide not to. I chose to use the hopeful, kind interactions of strangers and mentors as my guide, an antidote to what I was learning about myself at home. I do not know why or how I did that. Was it a type of resilience I developed or perhaps inherited genetically? As I answered that e-mail in my mind, I said, “Yes, I’m-on-your-side-ness is crucial for helping young children develop those kinds of emotional memories that will create kind and

humane adults, as well as strengthen their self-confidence. I know it from deep inside my soul. What if all those strangers and mentors had not reached out their hands, souls, smiles, lives to me? I would have felt so alone, lost, and abandoned. Who knows where I might have ended up?"

Once again, I sensed the kindness of strangers from a woman's e-mail sharing her support for my work. It gave me much to think about, organize, and focus on as I wrote this book, especially as I wrote about adults' emotional reactions to children's expressions of feelings—reminding me about the work I do with teachers of young children as I try to convince them about basic kindness and I'm-on-your-side-ness as playing significant roles in young children's emotional development.

HEALTHY EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN CHILDREN IS VERY IMPORTANT.

What We Know about Emotional Development

Many early childhood teachers and caregivers would probably agree with me that we have never really needed research to tell us that children's social-emotional development affects their academic success and emotional competence. Any early childhood professional knows that children who feel good about themselves are able to focus on cognitive tasks with more ease than children who are troubled, anxious, angry, tired, or sad. Children who are able to play in a cooperative, give-and-take fashion and who get along with others are just happier than those who seem alone, excluded, or unpopular. Therefore, it is reinforcing and affirming to discover

from the recent brain development literature that what we felt intuitively for so many years is now backed up by scientific research. Indeed, researchers, educators, psychologists, social workers, and people from disciplines outside of early childhood education are producing evidence that can support our relationships with young children in our classrooms.

“We have in fact arrived at a moment in which different disciplines are converging to produce a new understanding of emotional life” (Gerhardt 2004, 1). In *Why Love Matters: How Affection Shapes a Baby’s Brain*, Sue Gerhardt describes the importance of quality relationships between caregivers and young children. Gerhardt makes us aware that the ways in which we interact with children will shape them for the rest of their lives. According to Robin Karr-Morse and Meredith Wiley, a growing body of research shows that if children are badly treated in the first two years of life, they are more likely to become violent older children and adults. They warn us that “infancy and toddlerhood are times of enormous complexity when potentials for favorable adult outcomes can be maximized, diminished, or lost” (Karr-Morse and Wiley 1997, 15).

Marilou Hyson suggests that twenty years of research should be strong enough evidence to help us realize the importance of children’s emotional development, as well as the adult’s role in “supporting emotional competence.” Hyson summarizes the body of research with four points:

1. Emotions are the principal guides and motivators of behavior and learning from infancy throughout life.
2. Both positive and negative emotions—joy, interest, surprise, as well as sadness, anger, and fear—play important roles in development.

3. Young children's ability to express, understand, and regulate their emotions follows typical developmental sequences or pathways.
4. Both biological and environmental factors influence that pathway—temperament, culture, relationships with adults and peers, and many other factors come into play throughout childhood and beyond (Hyson 2004, 9).

Such a strong body of research should be enough evidence for us to understand the importance of children's emotional development as well as our role in supporting their social-emotional competence. We now know that both negative and positive emotions play an important role in emotional development. We need to be intentional in how we guide and motivate children's behavior and learning from the day they are born. Emotional memory in children's developing brains will be influenced not only by biological factors like genes or temperament, but just as importantly by experiences in their environment, including culture and relationships with significant adults.

The human brain is most impressionable very early in life. In fact, 85 percent of the foundational structure of the brain's functioning is developed during those very early years (Perry 2007). It follows that this is the time when humanity, compassion, and empathy can develop. From birth, our brain awaits those initial experiences that will help it to organize and allow it to express its potential. Even as a child is capable of learning language or how to transition from rolling over to sitting and from crawling to standing, her brain is organizing as a result of experiences and relationships. We learn language, we move, and—most importantly—we interpret the entire world in the context of our relationships. According to a leading expert in brain development, positive, harmonious,

responsive, care-giving experiences affect the strength and solid consistency of the part of the brain that provides the trunk for our relationships for the rest of our life (Perry 2007). Without these types of experiences we will forever have relationship difficulties. According to Perry, our brain functioning is a reflection of our human experiences. For example, racism, misogyny, and ageism are human inventions. None of them are genetically determined. These attitudes come from our experiences.

“ Not only are warm and supportive teacher-child relationships associated with higher levels of social and emotional competence, greater receptivity to the school setting, and better reasoning skills that result in higher achievement during the school years, but there are indications that these important relationships can also play a part in buffering the adverse effects of stress on the developing brain. ”

(Koplow 2007, xvi)

It is up to us to create positive emotional environments for our children. The literature about emotional development clearly states time and again that it is our roles, interactions, and relationships as parents, teachers, and other significant adults in children’s lives that will guide and facilitate children’s acquisition of healthy social-emotional skills. Indeed, teachers are called upon to heal, guide, facilitate, model, and teach children how to regulate their emotions. What has become clear to me from all the literature about brain and emotional development, and from what all the professionals in many different fields are saying, is that *what we do matters* (Jacobson 2006). I know this because researchers and educators tell me about the early and lasting effects of children’s environments

and experiences on brain development. I also know this because I understand that, even at age fifty-eight, aspects of my personal and professional life are still affected by my own early childhood experiences. Therefore, the more I come to understand my own emotions, the more effective I will be in helping children manage theirs.

How Teachers' Emotional Life Is Ignored in the Field

Coincidentally, at the same time I was preparing this chapter, *Teachers College Record* invited me to review a new book, *Unsmiling Faces: How Preschools Can Heal*, a collection of essays edited by Lesley Koplow. This is an excellent example of a strategy book that I mention in the section “Read Some of the Literature for Yourself,” toward the end of this chapter. It is an important book because it not only describes child development and how children are affected by relationships in the early years, but specifically talks about preschools as environments that can heal traumatized or abused children. It discusses very important issues that teachers need to understand about young children’s social-emotional development and suggests what they might do when confronted by serious emotional damage in children. It is, in fact, one of many books and articles giving teachers much-needed advice about how to manage children’s feelings and challenging behaviors. It does, however, leave out an important piece: for me, the book would be much more complete were it to include a chapter dedicated to emotional support for teachers who are doing this important healing work with children with special needs.

Although the book is written with a specific focus on children who have been traumatized, it is definitely appropriate and suitable for educators who work with typical children in any preschool setting. Our early childhood classrooms should *all* be emotional safe

havens for *everyone*. To that point, Vivian Gussin Paley asks in the foreword, “Is there a preschool anywhere that does not include those who at times feel sad, angry, and helpless?” (Koplow 2007, vii). Paley goes on to say:

“ The rest of us, teaching in relatively stable circumstances, tend to resist the idea that some sort of therapy may be a part of our job, even as we encourage larger numbers of families and children to meet with therapists. We tell ourselves in the face of worrisome and unpredictable behaviors, ‘The ordinary classroom is not meant to be a therapeutic community.’ Then we go about picking up the random pieces of confused, frustrated, and otherwise unfinished development that surround us as we try to create the facsimile of a caring family. ” (Koplow 2007, vii)

The writers of *Unsmiling Faces* describe in detail ways of creating a safe emotional haven for young, traumatized children, including those who are homeless and abused, and how to work with families and staff. The book is thorough and informative about the development of a child’s self-concept, and it even includes discussions about the importance of play and creating the appropriate physical therapeutic environment, as well as various techniques such as play therapy. One contributor reminds us that, “if we conceive of childhood only as a carefree, joyful time, we may be denying the experiential and emotional realities of many at-risk children who enter our classroom each morning” (Koplow 2007, 17). This statement is the introduction to a chapter with the title “If You’re Sad and You Know It,” an antidote to the usual children’s happiness song we all know so well. The author suggests that all

our “attempts to ‘cheer’ children may convey *our own* difficulty acknowledging, affirming, and tolerating a range of affects in young children, including those that communicate emotional pain and distress” (italics mine; Koplow 2007, 17–18). In my opinion, this may be one of the most important statements in the entire book.

The second part of the book opens with a chapter about the teacher’s role. It has critical implications for teacher education in general, not only for facilitators of special education. In this piece, Judith Ferber discusses the teacher’s role in a *healing* type of pre-school classroom, including details about organizing the physical environment, the importance of schedules and routines, how to set limits, and even the appropriate type of curriculum. In other words the teacher in a preschool setting has many different roles, as instructor, caregiver, and limit setter. Ferber talks about the importance of the teacher-child relationship, describing it as “pivotal” and the “mediating link” (Koplow 2007, 55). She goes on to say that, “Clearly, the importance of the teacher-child relationship for a needy child [I would say, *any* child] is paramount in effecting the development of cognition as well as emotional well-being” (Koplow 2007, 56).

These insights from “If You’re Sad and You Know It” lead me to question why there is a lack of discussion about teachers’ emotions. For example, many professional counselors seek out some type of therapeutic supervision so that their feelings, beliefs, emotional reactions, and subjectivity might not interfere with treatment of their clients. If we are to organize and develop preschools that heal, whether for traumatized or for typical children, what are we doing, as a profession, to help teachers self-reflect specifically about how they feel in the face of *their own* “difficulty acknowledging,

affirming, and tolerating a range of affects in young children, including those that communicate emotional pain and distress”? (Koplow 2007, 17–18).

Koplow states, “Teacher-child interactions must be open-ended, spontaneous, and genuine in order to facilitate emotional growth” (Koplow 2007, 24). I could not agree more. However, in this very important book about creating emotional safe havens for young children, there is not much discussion of emotional support for the teachers who work with them. Koplow goes on to say that adults can help children emotionally by giving them “permission to feel and express sadness, fear, anger, worry, and loneliness as well as joy, delight, excitement, enthusiasm, and other positive emotions” (Koplow 2007, 25). I cannot help but wonder how the adults who are caring for and educating young children are able to understand their own such emotions. More importantly, what are we, as teacher educators, doing to help them become more aware of their feelings so that they may be open-minded, spontaneous, and genuine in their relationships with children? Indeed, I have been wondering about this aspect of self-reflection for teachers for some time now. I talk about it quite a bit with relation to our biases in my previous book, *Confronting Our Discomfort: Clearing the Way for Anti-Bias in Early Childhood*, just as I discuss why reflective practice of this nature is so important for teachers:

“ There is no safe place emotionally or physically in the education and development of teachers for confronting uncomfortable feelings they might have. . . . It is not possible for teachers to refer children to their colleagues [like counselors do] or seek counseling supervision in the context

of education. Teachers just have to get on with it one way or another. As a result, young children are the recipients of many of our harmful, unconscious behaviors.” (Jacobson 2003, 19)

Early childhood classrooms should most certainly be safe emotional havens. The pertinent question for me is this: How might we support teachers doing this very important work with young children?

Another book on the topic of social-emotional development even goes so far as to suggest that teachers should have “mature healthy personalities” for supporting children’s emotional development (Gartrell 2004). Nancy Weber, a contributor to this book about teaching social-emotional skills, goes on to say:

“Teachers who have gone into early childhood education with their own basic needs unmet, or who feel oppressed and burdened, may inadvertently draw excessively from the children to meet their own basic needs. This preoccupation with concerns of their own precludes an understanding of children, and therefore makes acting on this understanding impossible.” (Weber, in Gartrell 2004, 4)

I would think that a statement such as this would be most off-putting for any teacher trying to acquire resources to teach children social-emotional skills. Surely a teacher would feel at a loss as to how she might factor in such deep and complex emotional insecurities. In the first place, how do we define someone as having a healthy, mature personality? How long does it take to become

healthy and mature? I often question my own maturity, and I have reached the ripe old age of fifty-eight! Secondly, how does this author intend to support a teacher who feels, as she describes: “oppressed and burdened” or “with basic needs unmet”? These broad statements about apparent flaws in teachers’ personalities are left hanging for an educator to pass over on her way to becoming the best teacher she strives to be. Except for leaving the profession if one has these undesirable human frailties, no other solution or assistance is offered.

ACTIONS TO TAKE

Read Some of the Literature for Yourself

For the past ten years or so, I have been collecting early childhood publications that discuss managing young children’s emotions or suggest guidance strategies about their behaviors. Please refer to the suggested reading section at the end of this chapter for a list of some of these resources. Some address how to handle boys, specifically, and others are about children with special needs. Some describe the importance of quality relationships in terms of influencing earliest emotional memories in the brain as well as enhancing academic success later in life. Many describe, in detail, which exact strategies to use for this or that behavior problem or issue. There are many instructive and thorough books suggesting worthwhile, positive, and appropriate approaches for teachers of young children to use in their classrooms. As you browse through some of the references at the end of this chapter, you will surely identify strategies that fit your belief system or the way you approach discipline. As

you will see in the following chapters, the strategies you choose will depend on your own early childhood experiences and your beliefs, values, and educational ideologies.

Most of the books and articles prescribe a number of steps that will help solve problems you might be having with young children. For example, Dan Gartrell uses what he calls a “five finger formula” so that one of the prescribed steps can be counted from each finger (Gartrell 2004, 82). “Cool down” is for the thumb; “identifying the problem” goes with the pointer finger; “brainstorming solutions” is connected with the middle finger, which Gartrell calls “the tall guy”; and so on. In an earlier chapter, Gartrell presents six “guidance practices,” including reducing the need for mistaken behavior by “using teaching practices that are developmentally appropriate and culturally sensitive,” practicing “positive teacher-child relations,” holding class meetings, using “positive statements of expected behaviors,” and building partnerships with parents (Gartrell 2004, 31–32).

In *Social and Emotional Development*, Dave Riley and his fellow authors offer seven practical tips for interacting with infants and toddlers, all of which connect research with practice to help teachers and parents understand social and emotional development (Riley et al. 2008). Examples include responding promptly to young children’s distress signals or allowing children to have transitional objects such as a favorite stuffed animal. The authors explain clearly how to foster children’s impulse control:

- “ Instead of saying ‘Don’t run,’ try rephrasing your request: ‘Use walking feet.’ Instead of ‘Don’t hit,’ try saying, ‘Soft touches.’ You can take it one step further by modeling the action while saying the words. Instead of ‘Don’t pull the

cat's tail,' try 'Pet the kitty like this.' . . . Monitor how often you say 'don't,' and force yourself to rephrase your directives in positive terms." (Riley et al. 2008, 72)

One of the books I read suggests six things you can do as a teacher to change your approach with children. The authors describe ways to use your body language, like smiling, touching, or hugging; how to listen attentively and what types of questions to ask; and how to "reframe [children's] statements in a positive light" (Kaiser and Rasminsky 1999, 21). In a more recent book the same authors give more detailed suggestions and prescriptions for preventing challenging behaviors, especially in relation to children's social context (Kaiser and Rasminsky 2003).

Lilian Katz and Diane McClellan, as they describe the importance of the teacher's role in *Fostering Children's Social Competence: The Teacher's Role*, write that "teachers can play a significant role in supporting social development. . . . What works well with young children is individualized guidance. . . . Individual focus and the warmth of the interaction increase the child's capacity to hear and respond deeply to the teacher's suggestions" (Katz and McClellan 1997, 19–20). Supported by a growing body of research, they warn that if teachers do not help children develop social competence, these children are likely to fail academically, drop out of school, or develop mental health problems. Throughout the book, the authors give teachers many different suggestions for helping children develop and learn social competency, including expressing respect for children's feelings, establishing authority and credibility, accommodating individual differences, encouraging impulse control, invoking ground rules, and so on (Katz and McClellan 1997, 66–72).

In addition to the books I've discussed above, I recommend that you take a look at the references at the end of this chapter. Many of these excellent books and articles about behavior management and effective social-emotional skills offer teachers helpful suggestions and strategies. In fact, in a later chapter I discuss a survey about teachers and anger that reveals that teachers certainly seem to have benefited from workshops, trainings, and books like these. At least they are able to describe word for word what they *should* be doing to help children with challenging behaviors. While I am sure that I have not exhausted the literature on this topic, most of the books and articles I have explored give interesting and helpful tips, prescriptions, steps, guidelines, suggestions, and descriptions of what to do to prevent and manage children's challenging behaviors. Nevertheless, I have not yet found one book or article that focuses specifically on assisting the adults who care for and educate young children to understand their personal feelings or emotional development in relation to these behaviors. Neither have I found a resource that makes connections between how teachers' emotions affect their interactions with children and families.

CONCLUSION

Back in 1954, more than forty years before the recent growing body of research about brain development, some teacher educators were concerned about preparing teachers to understand themselves through self-reflection. In an article titled "Understanding Others through Facing Ourselves," Arthur T. Jersild, a professor of education at Teachers College, Columbia University, in New York, suggested that "knowledge of self requires a different kind of

personal involvement than the usual academic course encourages or demands" (Jersild 1954). According to Jersild, in order to acquire self-knowledge, "one must have the courage to seek it and the humility to accept what one may find."

“ Everything that enters into the relationship between a teacher and the child has or might have a significant bearing on what a child thinks about himself and how he feels about himself. Everything that transpires in a teacher's dealings with a child might also help the teacher to learn something about himself for his functioning as a teacher is to a large extent a projection of what he is.

In order to have insight into the child's strivings and the problems and issues he is coping with the teacher must strive to face the same issues within his own life. These issues are largely emotional in nature and the endeavor to understand oneself and others has a deep emotional meaning. It calls for more than intellectual cleverness and academic competence. ” (Jersild 1954, 411)

Surely, we cannot think that teachers deal only with subject content like mathematics, literacy, or social studies and do not have to handle intense, emotional situations with young children moment by moment, day to day. If we agree that there is much personal and intimate involvement with children's expressions of feelings and their behaviors that constantly challenge us, then surely it is our moral and ethical responsibility to support teachers' self-reflection and awareness of their own emotions. Not to do so is a shirking of our responsibility as advocates of quality care and education for young children.

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CHAPTER TWO

WE UNDERSTAND HOW WE FEEL AND WHY

Emotion matters are difficult, dense, subjective, personal, communal, socially lived and understood, historical and cultural, impossible to avoid, intertwined with all that we say, think, write, know, withhold, remember, and wish to forget. Emotion matters drive motives for action, speech, judgment, and decision-making. . . . Emotion forms part of how we come to develop attachments to others as well as to objects and ideas. Emotion matters to teachers because the classroom is alive with bodies, hearts, and selves, and because learning is joyous, exciting, frightening, risky, passionate, boring, disappointing, and enraging. Emotion matters are inscribed in the teaching situation, a point too often forgotten.

—LAURA R. MICCICHE

It is an act of courage to acknowledge our own uncertainty and sit with it for awhile.

—HARRIET LERNER

There is courage in being accountable. We truly accept responsibility for our own less-than-honorable behaviors, even when doing so challenges our favored image of the self.

—HARRIET LERNER

The Weirdest Class

A couple of years ago, at a college near Philadelphia, during the last class of the semester, one of the undergraduate students gave her presentation. As she was speaking, she began to cough. Her face was turning red with embarrassment and her discomfort from coughing—especially as she tried to suppress it. I offered her a sip of water from my water bottle. She drank and then continued with the presentation. However, the coughing continued, along with her attempts to suppress it.

Finally, I interrupted the student by telling the class that many years before, while living in Israel, I had taken a course in bio-energetics. I said that I did not have the time to tell them all the details—just that it had something to do with storing emotions in different energy points of the body and learning how to release the energies through specific physical exercises. I explained how our