



Overcoming the confusing paradox we teach children about emotions and safety

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Preview:

As people who are charged with keeping children safe, it is good to be aware of situations that can cause them harm. An often-overlooked element when considering children's physical safety from sexual abuse is their *emotional* safety and wellbeing, which can drastically affect their overall development as it relates to their mental health and emotional resilience.

Article:

Introduction

We are all working individually and collectively to create and maintain safe environments in our own immediate environments and within our community. As people who are charged with keeping children safe, it is good to be aware of situations that can cause them harm. An often-overlooked element when considering children's physical safety from sexual abuse is their *emotional* safety and wellbeing, which can drastically affect their overall development as it relates to their mental health and emotional resilience. The way that we address and respond to children's emotions can impact how well they're able to identify what they're feeling, when they're feeling uncomfortable or unsafe, whether they will approach us if something is amiss and how they handle stress in general.

Boundary violations, grooming and abuse

In many situations where abuse occurs, it is preceded by boundary violations, which can also be part of a system of grooming behaviors. Grooming involves an offender's manipulative actions to overcome a person, family or community's defenses by slowly and progressively desensitizing their natural reactions to inappropriate or abusive behaviors. Boundary violations (physical, emotional, sexual, behavioral, etc.), when used during the grooming process, are often done as a test to see how far limits can be pushed before abuse occurs. They can also make the child feel (and appear) to be the one responsible or complicit for inappropriate behavior. This can cause complex and conflicting feelings for the child and is difficult for them to manage. Feeling unsafe, afraid and uncomfortable are just some of the common reactions survivors cite surrounding the experience of boundary violations, grooming behaviors and abuse.



Safe, responsible and caring adults encourage children to speak up

When children are feeling unsafe or uncomfortable—regardless of the reasons why—we want them to approach us with the expectation that we will listen to them and get them the help that they need. However, there are some elements surrounding emotions and big reactions, how adults deal with them and what we say about them, that make it more difficult for children to approach us with their problems.

We know through research and our own experience with child victim-survivors, that they have a challenging time coming to adults to disclose for a variety of reasons, including feelings of shame, guilt and fear, coupled with concerns about our big reactions and the way that we respond to their attempts to share. In fact, children very commonly do not approach the adults in their lives to talk about abuse that happened to them during the first year that they are abused, nor for the next five. If they can overcome their fears enough to approach us, adults commonly misconstrue the communication without realizing that it was a “cry for help” or a testing of sorts to see how we will react. This is a significant problem, because one of the best ways that we can protect children is by providing them with a safe haven to come to when they need to disclose abuse or anything else bothering them, yet we unintentionally create situations where children feel they cannot share.

The paradox

A specific example that can impact children’s emotional wellbeing, and their ability to come to us, is when we dismiss or shame a child’s emotions or feelings in general, daily life situations. We, or someone we know, may even be doing this without even realizing it. It might look like the adult is ignoring these feelings, getting angry about them, invalidating the reactions, belittling them, or making fun of the child. Other examples might include phrases such as: “get over it,” or telling them to, “stop crying and carrying on,” “brush it off,” “you’re fine,” that “strong kids don’t cry,” to “suck it up,” or saying “are you crying, *again?*!” This has a detrimental effect on children.

Dismissing children’s reactions, yet expecting them to come to us when they’re struggling, is a confusing paradox because it tells children (consciously and subconsciously) that you aren’t willing to listen to them or support them when they’re upset or hurting. It teaches them their feelings are wrong, inappropriate or invalid, and that they have to bury those emotions because you or someone else is annoyed or can’t handle them, or because you feel that it is an excessive reaction to something you perceive to be minor. Faced with these reactions, children often begin to believe that there is something inherently wrong with them because of their feelings. Imagine how this can be compounded when a child is also being abused or groomed by someone else.

The big reactions children experience—and the list is endless—these feelings are completely normal! Life is hard. Not everything can be fixed. Sometimes things don’t go



our way. Sometimes we are disappointed, frightened, sad, angry, hurt, etc. Whatever it is, it is a big deal to kids and that feeling should never be devalued.

What should we say, instead?

Our efforts in speaking to children about safe environments should be an ongoing conversation. Part of our role is to help youth identify emotions across different situations, and teach them that emotions are normal and “OK” to feel—then model it. Here are helpful examples of things you can say in the moment:

- “It seems like you’re angry* (*insert emotion) right now. It’s OK to be angry at me. Are you angry?”
- “It’s OK to feel how you feel. It’s not OK to...”
- “Let’s take a deep breath together and pause for a minute so we can work this out. Do you want to sit?”
- “I am not in a place where I can hear you right now. Can you give me 5 minutes, and then we can sit together so I can listen?”
- “You are good and kind, and there’s nothing that you can say to me that will change how I care for you. Do you have something you need to share?”
- “Is there anything that is happening with _____ that is making you feel uncomfortable?”
- “It’s OK to be upset. How about you stay here, and I’ll be right there in the kitchen. When you’re ready to talk, let me know, and we will figure this out together.”
- “If you need to talk about a big feeling, I’m here and ready to listen.”
- “When it comes to your safety, I will believe you and you won’t get into trouble with me. And you can always tell me about your feelings.”

When they’re especially young, children aren’t capable of regulating their emotions. Their pre-frontal cortex—the rational, decision-making part of their brain isn’t fully formed until their 20s. The younger they are, the more they lack the experience and ability to put things into perspective or context. Depending on their age, sometimes we may need to ask whether they want us to listen, or if they want us to help problem-solve for solutions—or both. Sometimes they just need to know that you will accept them, big emotions and all.

Children also need to know that they can take these emotions to you, as a responsible, safe adult who is willing to listen to all the seemingly “little” problems (little to you; big to them) that crop up, which also shows them that you can handle the big ones like when they’re feeling uncomfortable or unsafe. When the emotions range to discomfort with a person or place, or point to a lack of safety, this is a bigger issue. The more you have conversations about these subjects, the more emotional agility (and future emotional resilience to handle stress) the child will have and the greater their comfort will be in discussing hard topics. Please note that some children may have more difficulty with emotional regulation, especially if they have been abused. If you feel that there may be



a deeper problem apart from age and developmentally-appropriate emotional expression, please speak to a pediatrician or mental health professional.

Look inward when you become upset

We need to be able to share our “calm” with children despite what they are saying or doing—easier said than done, of course. We know it is tough when a youth is showing that they are feeling dysregulated and overwhelmed, and even more so when you might be feeling the same way, at the same time. Perhaps, when we're feeling especially overwhelmed while caring for children, we need to reflect inward. If you're finding yourself reacting negatively and outwardly to children's strong reactions, then your own strong reactions or inability to cope might be something to explore.

Conclusion

When it comes to interactions involving children, youth and the vulnerable, we must take particular care as safe adults to help them. Children need a safe place to explore the myriad of emotions that life is going to give them. You are a safe, responsible and caring adult who has a wealth of knowledge in comparison with these little ones—even teenagers. They need you to be able to handle their small and big emotions as a part of learning about healthy coping and healthy relationships. If a child has a situation where they are being sexually abused, it's important that they have you, as a safe place where they can communicate and get help.