Emotional Flooding—
Using Empathy to Help Babies Manage Strong Emotions

All of us can think of times when we have been overwhelmed by our emotions. Now let’s consider the young children we care for and think about some of their challenging behavior. Often young children’s challenging behavior may be the result of emotional flooding.

How emotions are processed

Most of the time, as adults, we can manage our emotions by processing them through the “thinking brain”—the cerebral cortex. This part of our brain is responsible for self-control and judgment. In children the “thinking brain” is not fully developed. Children get emotionally flooded much more easily than adults because they process their experiences through their “emotional brain”—the limbic system. This part of the brain handles emotional responding and pleasure seeking (Institute for Early Childhood Education and Research n.d.). Young children have not yet fully developed the skill of stopping and thinking through possible actions and their consequences. Teachers can provide support that can guide children in learning the skills used to regulate or manage their emotions.

Empathy as a teaching strategy

It might be helpful to think about what helps us manage our strong emotions as adults. One of the first things that can help adults and children to calm down is for someone to empathize with them. When we empathize with someone, we validate their feelings.

In the opening scenario, one of the passengers in the car said, “Linda, I can’t believe that he didn’t believe you!” Hearing her say that immediately helped Linda feel better about the situation. She felt someone understood what she was feeling.

Where does empathy come from?

One of the ways empathy develops is in the context of relationships. A patient, caring adult who understands child development and knows a particular child and his or her preferences can help that child learn about emotions and how to regulate them. One of the best ways to learn about individual children and development is through observation.
When we notice a child becoming overwhelmed, we can observe what is happening. Observation helps us anticipate and perhaps minimize potentially challenging situations. We can observe the environment, the child, and our practice to see what might be contributing to the child’s loss of emotional control.

Next, we can reflect and ask ourselves what the child is trying to tell us. All behavior has meaning. With very young children it can be difficult to figure out what that meaning is. We may ask ourselves questions such as, Are certain transitions harder for this child than others? In what areas of the room or time of day do these situations arise most often? Consulting with the family about what they have observed can provide insight into the meaning of the behavior. Once we have a better understanding of what is happening and why, we can empathize with the child’s feelings (Foulds et al. 2008).

Other toddlers may respond better to a teacher whispering what she thinks they are feeling. A teacher can whisper, “I know you feel angry. I know you didn’t want to stop playing to have your diaper changed. You want to play.” Some toddlers respond well to the adult’s calm presence because it can help them contain their strong emotions.

Our objective as educators is to use the strategy that is most effective in helping a particular young child feel heard and understood. Sometimes, empathy is all that is needed for a child to move on and for order to resume.

Putting empathy into practice

When toddlers are overwhelmed, pediatrician Harvey Karp (2004) says it is best for our response to match their intensity and limited language. When Sammy, age 20 months, is squirming on the changing table saying, “NO, NO, NO,” his teacher can match that intensity and language by saying, “NO, NO, I hear you. NO, NO, you don’t want me to change your diaper! You want to play!” It can be surprising how quickly some toddlers calm down when teachers use this approach. Once toddlers see that an adult understands their feelings and message, they often are ready to move on.

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Try it

Next time you observe a young child becoming emotionally flooded, try empathizing with her. Depending on what you know about her, you can match her intensity or talk softly to her. Notice how she reacts. The important point is to help the child know you understand her feelings.

References


Additional resources


Developmental Behavioral Pediatrics Online—www.dbpeds.org

Devereux Early Childhood Initiative for Infants and Toddlers—www.devereux.org/site/PageServer?pagename=deci_it

Technical Assistance Center on Social Emotional Intervention for Young Children—http://challengingbehavior.fmhi.usf.edu

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