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Acknowledging Feelings in Your Children

November 5, 2009 by [Michelle Cantrell](#)



When my 8-year-old daughter fell while jumping around in her room, she began crying that she'd been hurt. After 8 years, I have learned to distinguish between "big hurts" and "little hurts" and this clearly was a little hurt. I asked her in a soothing voice if she was ok, where was she hurt, and does she need me to look at it? I knew, of course,

that she was ok. But what she was looking for in that moment was a validation of her feelings — an acknowledgment of her pain, even if it was brief and minor. After my response, she perked right up and went on to her next activity without another thought. Had I given her the response that in the past has come more naturally to me — a kind of "buck up" attitude, her "recovery" would have been prolonged. She would have continued to cry, not out of pain, but out of frustration that she feels misunderstood.

It was at that moment I had a flashback to an incident between me and husband when we were still dating. It had been one of "those" days and the icing on the cake was after a long day at a new job when I went to my car and discovered a parking ticket. I lost it. I cried the whole hour-long drive home. When I got there, I called my husband-then-boyfriend, still sobbing. I told him about the ticket, to which he responded: "It's just a parking ticket." The rage that filled within me at those words was more than I can describe, and the response I gave him before hanging up on him cannot be repeated, though let's just say it included a word that begins with 'F'.

After I hung up on him, he got in his car and drove over to try again to be supportive, understanding his mistake but also explaining his intentions. He was trying to give me perspective by saying "it's just a ticket" — reminding me that ultimately it wasn't such a big deal. But I didn't want perspective. I wanted him to empathize with my pain and frustration.

Sure, in and of itself a parking ticket wasn't a big deal, but for me it was the proverbial straw, and the emotional pain was as intense as if something much grander had happened. Is this all beginning to sound a bit familiar in the context of your children? Your child stubs his toe, and his reaction is akin to his entire foot being sawed off. Or your daughter spills something on her favorite dress, and the world is about to end. As parents, we may feel like rolling our eyes and saying something like "get over it" or "it's not a big deal". But what we aren't realizing is it IS a big deal to them, and by offering platitudes, we are teaching them that we don't value their perspective on their own experiences.

"Being heard and seen is so important to our children. To be totally ourselves and fully expressed without the risk of judgment. That is one of the greatest gifts parents give to their children." Susan Howson, a Family and Relationships Coach, and creator of [Magnificent Creations](#). Howson went on to say, "In life, we encounter difficult situations and feelings. Being in touch with those feelings and experiencing these emotions fully, even when it feels unusual and uncomfortable to the child, is essential for a child to experience where they are at that moment. The expression and awareness of all feelings is important."

Of course, this doesn't mean we have to over-react ourselves to every injury or injustice our kids experience. It is important to gauge their reaction and respond accordingly. There is also a time and place for teaching more appropriate responses. [Annie Zirkel](#), a Parenting Consultant points out that "We want resilient kids who don't maximize pain because this strategy has been shown to increase pain." But there is a balance to teaching kids to manage their feelings in relation to painful events, and Zirkel adds "We also want kids who do not disconnect from their genuine experiences."

Still, sometimes it might feel as though we're being manipulated, and it is hard to show sympathy. But Ray Fisher, a Psychotherapist at the Council for Relationships notes that "Whether the child is crying for attention or is seriously injured the child is looking for something from the parent and if the parent doesn't attend to their child's needs the child will either escalate their behavior or disengage from the parent. Parents should know that if either of these events occurs children learn valuable lessons about who they can count on when they need help." A family therapist I used to see shared similar sentiments, reminding me that one day they won't turn to me for comfort, instead seeking it outside the home, so why not encourage them to seek comfort from us for as long as possible.

Adding to Fisher's sentiment, Dr. Mark Sharp, a Clinical Psychologist with the [Aiki Relationship Institute](#) said, "The "buck up" mentality can do a couple of things: teach kids that their feelings are "wrong" or inaccurate and encourage them to not pay adequate attention to them, or lead some children to becoming even more dramatic in their expressions of emotion because they don't feel like they are being heard or taken seriously."

This might also be a good opportunity for the parent to examine her own upbringing. Understanding your reactions to a situation can enable you to better guide your child through life's hurdles. **Bette Alkazian, a Family Therapist and Parent Coach** works with parents “to examine their own values and past experiences before evaluating what their child’s reaction “should” be. For example, some parents were raised with the “buck up” attitude ... may cause them to have less patience than perhaps they should have for the child in a given situation. The best way to get away from old attitudes is to imagine how much the parent might have wanted to express as a child him/herself, and wasn’t allowed.” When I reflect on this in terms of my own childhood, I recall being one who never revealed any feelings. This approach wasn’t necessarily guided by my parents, but I was a very independent child and refused to rely on anyone else for comfort. Without anyone telling me to, I took the “buck up” attitude. I have had to work hard to step away from this mentality in my own parenting.

Besides, as Dr. Laura Markham of AhaParenting.com reminded me, research shows that pain is subjective. “Emotions such as fear or embarrassment always exacerbate pain. Maybe that stubbed toe didn’t seem to warrant so much fuss, but only your child knows what the pain is like for her. Kids don’t have as much ability as adults do to manage and compartmentalize their feelings, so their tears and upset may express both the emotional and the physical pain they feel in a given situation. In other words, being knocked down and struck out at home plate may seem a mild injury to us, but our child may not be able to stop crying because the tears relieve emotional disappointment and shame as well as the physical pain.” And this goes back to my parking ticket. The emotions surrounding the situation — which included the larger picture of feeling stress about new financial responsibilities, a new career, and juggling a relationship — intensified the emotional pain I was feeling. Reflecting on that moment that happened so many years ago really gave me insight on the emotions behind my childrens’ behaviors, and next time I won’t roll my eyes when they stub their toe, but instead offer hugs and kisses, and any other comfort they need.