

june-july @ symbio

upcoming presentations

Encouraging Developmentally Useful Play

@ Twins By The Bay
College Avenue Presbyterian Church
5951 College Avenue
Oakland CA

Thursday 14 July
7:00-8:30pm
**members only event*

Parents know that children learn through play but how does this happen? What are they learning, what are the lessons of each age and period in development, and what is the role of play in this process? Is there such a thing as the wrong kind of play and can too much, or too little play ever have a negative impact? We'll tackle these questions as well as common concerns involving sharing, discipline and possession that often come up in discussions of play habits and practices.

RSVP: www.twinsbythebay.org



Lessoning the Fury: Learning from Anger

Q: *I'm the parent of three kids under the age of six. I've always considered myself a fairly patient person - or at least until I had kids. Lately though, things have taken a turn for the worse. I've been losing my temper on a daily basis (and, more often than not, multiple times per day). I try to tell myself this is normal, that I've got a 2, 4 and 6 year-old, who's patience wouldn't be tested!? But the other day, after I yelled at our son, which resulted in all three of my kids crying, I've been feeling increasingly guilty about getting so mad, so often. There are days where it feels like all I've done is yell. I'm worried that my anger might be hurting my kids, not to mention my husband who is often collateral damage. Are there any words of wisdom you can give?*

A: Sometimes parents get angry with kids in ways that they wish they wouldn't. We hear constantly from loving, committed parents who struggle with resentments, frustrations and disappointments that they did not expect to encounter. It's an issue that comes up with almost every parents we work with, yet it's a subject that is rarely addressed in depth by the abundant literature

on parenting and parenthood: how should parents handle the times when the stresses of parenting overwhelm any sense of calm, or even hope?

One of the most important things for parents to know is that it's normal to move through a range of emotions that includes some severe experiences of difficult or negative emotions. The feelings and behaviors which surface in most parents' worst moments are far more common than they would think.

Parenting is, one hopes, something that you do with your whole soul. As such, it often occasions an emotional reckoning of unique and sometimes painful depths. Very few of us had sufficient models or instruction for healthy and helpful expressions of anger, disappointment or despair. As such, parents can find themselves struggling to invent a roadmap for an unfamiliar terrain upon which they have already embarked.

We work on a daily basis with parents who are struggling with guilt and grief over things they have said to their children, or to their partner in front of their children, or things they felt like saying but were barely able to contain. Unfortunately, the ubiquity of such experiences does little to prevent them from feeling alone or hopeless in such times. Our message to parents in these low moments is that they are in the process of becoming the example that they never had themselves for how to feel, express and communicate anger, frustration and exasperation in healthy, emotionally sound ways.

The truth is that children need to see their parents angry and in despair at times. This is important for two reasons:

1) Young children learn by emulating what they see modeled; during the early years, verbal instruction is a distant second to demonstration in terms of teaching power. The goal is for parents to be able to be transparent in their anger and in the process of struggling to express it appropriately.

This same struggle occurs for a toddler or preschooler multiple times a day and your child needs to understand that anger is normal to feel and okay to express, as long as it is expressed in an acceptable way. In other words, it is okay to feel any feeling; there are no bad emotions. It is how you express what you feel that matters.

This message gives kids an achievable goal when it comes to anger. It's not doable for a young child to never get so frustrated that she wants to hit, or bite, or throw a temper tantrum. However, over time, it will be doable for

her to learn to express these feelings in appropriate ways; and what is appropriate will vary from family to family. For example, in some families some yelling is okay, in some families it's not. As long as there are clear boundaries around violence and pointed insults, healthy expression of anger can vary from one family to the next. What's important is that there are consistent messages about where the lines are.

The good news is that maintaining consistency about the rules does not mean parents must never break them. Parents awash in guilt over having broken one of their own rules (mom yells, dad uses a bad word, someone slams a door in the midst of a heated discussion) often miss a powerful teaching experience when they avoid discussing the incident.

If you lose your temper, go and talk with your kids about afterwards, not just once, but go back to it repeatedly. In this way you let them know that you are not afraid of what happened and that they do not need to be either. You are also modeling for them what it takes to get out of trouble after you blow it – an essential skill for toddlers and preschoolers. Your kids will learn much more about wrestling with anger when they get to see that anger is, indeed, something that requires some wrestling with at times. You want to convey the message that safety and connection depend not on never feeling angry, but on expressing it well when you do, even if that sometimes means going back to say you're sorry for making a mistake.

2) The second reason for maintaining some transparency around your anger is that kids need to feel congruence between what they are sensing about a parent's emotional state and what is being expressed. Parents who are on the verge of blowing a gasket but attempting to practice their best calm-loving-parent voice will sometimes inspire more provocation than compliance from kids. When kids feel like something is off, they will feel anxious and will often opt for pushing parents to the point of an explosion rather than tolerating the anxiety of wondering what is coming next.

This doesn't mean that your kids will be better off if you lose your temper freely, but you do them more good by telling them, "I am getting really angry because you are not listening to me so we're leaving the park before I lose my temper" than you will from masking your feelings.

The trick is to express anger before it gets to the boiling point while you can still be controlled in your expression. Doing so requires developing enough comfort with the fact that you can feel angry, even rageful, at your kids, or your spouse, so that you are able to recognize these feelings before they get so big that they take over.

In the end, outside of instances of violence, the damage done

done by expressions of anger is often rooted in the feelings and beliefs that govern family life outside of angry moments. By creating a family culture in which anger can be accepted and discussed, you can become a team engaged in the project of figuring out how to channel those intense feelings into healthy expressions.

You can all come together to evaluate successes and failures; you can congratulate an impressive display of self-control and commiserate over how it feels to be in trouble for breaking the rules about how to get angry. You will not be able to avoid anger or conflict in your home, but you can do a great deal to banish the shame and disconnection that often linger in its wake.

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www.symbiosf.com

noelle cochran, psyd
lele diamond, mft license no. 40324