

# The Importance of the Development Of a Feeling Language For Children and Adults

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The program that I have chosen today is to teach you about children's feelings. But for you to understand children's feelings, you have to understand your own feelings. You'll find a blank piece of paper in your file. Draw a line in the middle of it from top to bottom. Write down a feeling word on the left side for what you feel right now about being so busy about coming down to this program.

*(Pause and give them time to do so.)*

On the right side, write down all the feeling words you can think of in 3 minutes. Don't worry, this is just for you. You won't have to show it to anyone else.

*(Pause for 3 minutes to give them time to do so.)*

Count the feeling words. I always take only 2 minutes for this in the US and the highest number I've ever gotten is 25. How many had 15 or more? **(Wait for show of hands.)** How many had 18 or more? **(Wait for show of hands.)** How many had 20? **(Wait for show of hands.)** In order to teach children and nurture them, we need to know "feeling language" which is very difficult if it hasn't been taught or allowed. The next thing I want to do is to hand out the list of feeling words. There are over 250 words for feelings in English. Yet we have troubles expressing our feelings.

When I was a little girl, and I tried to express my feeling, my mother hit me in the mouth. And my mouth bled. My father beat me with the belt when he was angry. And I had red marks all over my legs. I could not cry. But I was hit if I was happy, too. Things were very mixed up in my family life. So I learned not to express my feelings at all. This was very confusing to me. When I grew up, all I did was rage. I raged at my sewing machine, when it didn't work right. I raged at my dog. I raged at my children and I am very ashamed of that. But the only feeling I had was rage. So I had to learn from the beginning how to express all of my feelings.

***(Hand out the paper with the feeling words in English)***

If you'd look at this piece of paper, you'll see many feelings that there are. There are even more feeling words than that, that we don't have words for.

Here is what it sounds like to make a sentence that describes how you feel when you are upset or even when you feel happy. "I feel \_\_\_\_\_ when you call me names because then I think you don't like me." OR "I feel \_\_\_\_\_ when you ask me what I think because then I know you think I am your equal."

Pick out three feeling words on the list that describes how you have felt during the past week and make feeling statements about them to the person sitting next to you. They don't have to be revealing statements. They can just be everyday common feelings. Nothing private or secretive that would embarrass you.

***(Give them 10 minutes to do this assignment.)***

Now, I'd like to hand out another piece of paper with all the faces that show feelings. Do you recognize some of these facial expressions? Do some of them make you laugh? Have you ever seen any of these expressions on the faces of your children or friends? You don't have to fill out all the blanks under the faces right now. It's a tool you can use with your own children.

***(Hand out the paper with the faces that show feelings.)***

You can point to a face and ask your child or student, "Do you recognize that feeling? What is that little boy feeling? How does the little boy or girl feel?" It can help you recognize your own feelings as a parent, too.

When I was 34 yrs. Old, I felt like a failure as a parent because of my rage. So I took a course of parenting. It was 6 weeks long, one night a week. I recommend a course in parenting to every parent, every grandparent and every teacher in this room to take these courses at least once in your life time. One night we spent 2 hours talking about feelings. It was like they were talking a strange language to me. I couldn't identify my feelings at all. I had written a story in 1973 about a little bird who learned to fly. It was a story of my life as a little girl. I didn't know what to do with it after I had written it so I hid it in my drawer. But after I went home from the parenting course, I took out that story and I read it again. 'Skylark' is the name of my story. Skylark is the bird who couldn't fly. When I read it again, I saw that Skylark did not express his feelings of being abused. So I had written 15 pages with no feeling words in it. I had described people, plot, events, and story, but my characters didn't use any feeling words. All I could do was an intellectual exercise. I wrote in the feelings that Skylark would be expected to feel. But I still could

not feel my feelings. I didn't know it, but this was a major turning point in my life because I began to notice the times that I wasn't allowing my children to express their own feelings. This was in 1976.

To be able to share your feelings with another human being, you would have to be able to trust them. I did not trust others with my feelings because I had been abused when I tried to share them and, also, because my father sexually abused me when I was 2 through 8 years old. I kept this a secret from my first husband in 9 years of marriage, and I kept it a secret from the man who was to become my second husband. Secrets like that destroy trust.

Fortunately, six months after we were married, we attended a weekend "Marriage Encounter" program during which we were to write out our feelings 3 times a day for 20 minutes and then discuss them privately. I felt compelled to trust my husband and tell my secret. I had thought that no one would want me if they knew, but I overcame that fear and wrote him a letter, pouring out my heart and my secret to him. Then I waited while he read it.

What would his response be? Would he turn away from me? Would he not think me worthy to be his wife? None of that happened. He said, "Now I understand why you wrote your Skylark story and present it to groups and organizations. I didn't understand before but now it fits." I was 39 years old and I had finally told someone my secret. But my feelings were still blocked, locked up, and ice cold.

It took me until I was 46 yrs. old to express my feelings. Those extra feelings all of the rage of feelings were connected to my telling the secret of sexual abuse when I was a child. Until I would tell the secret in a support group and have the injustice validated, all those feelings were blocked. And I had to grow up from a little girl who couldn't express feelings or identify them to an adult who could.

One of the goals of parenting is to teach children to identify and name their feelings. 15 yrs. old is about the age of maturity. By 15, 16, 17 yrs. old, a child should be able to express their feelings and identify them. But that's not the final goal. The final goal is that when the child becomes an adult, all those feelings must be governed and regulated by love, compassion, and virtues. Love, compassion, and virtues should be an umbrella over all those feelings. Because feelings are like energy in our body. They cause us to have a biological, psychological experience. That energy has to be expressed in appropriate ways. Running, jumping, sports, talking, sometimes I have to hit a pillow. When I got angry at work, I would go into the bathroom, and run in place. One day I raged at my boss. After 8 yrs. of working for him, I raged at him. Then I yelled "I'M GOING HOME, NOW." And he said, "Are you coming back tomorrow?" I said, "YES!" Then I went home and couldn't eat. I couldn't sleep. I worried all night long because I had to go back to work tomorrow morning. The very next morning, I was entering the radio station I worked at like a scared puppy, and he was waiting right there for me. I walked up to him and said, "I am sorry I got mad at you yesterday." He said, "You have nothing to apologize, for you were just expressing your feelings." He understood.

And the next week, a man came to be interviewed on a live program about a book he had written, called "All the rage". He was going to give a seminar that weekend on anger. I decided to take his seminar. I studied anger from different sources for 7 yrs. And I began to teach Anger Management at the college. I stopped raging at my children.

How young can you tell to teach children about feelings? At what age? I can give you an example, a story about my sister. She and her 2 1/2 yrs. old daughter were visiting us for Christmas. All the adults were gathered together in the living room talking. And my niece, Natalie came running into the room screaming. My sister put her arms around Natalie. She said, "Tell mama, I'm frightened of the helicopter." My sister was teaching my 2 1/2 year old toddler niece about feeling language. And my little niece said, "I'm frightened, Mommy." And another time, I saw my sister looked at my 2 1/2 yrs. old niece and said, "You look sad, are you?" And this little girl could affirm that. My sister then had the opportunity to ask my niece, "What are you sad about? What has happened?"

This is teaching children to identify feelings. There is a story of Belinda. I was sitting at a table at a conference in N.Y. A woman was telling a story of her daughter who was 6 years old. Her daughter's name was Belinda. The mother was away at an evening event and a babysitter was taking care of Belinda. When she came home, the babysitter was left, he was a man. But it could just as well have been a woman. And Belinda said, "I hope Derrick doesn't ever touch me where he did again." And the mother's heart began

to beat very fast. “Where did he touch you?” She said, “Right here,” pointing to her pubic area. “How do you feel?” she said. She keyed in the feeling words immediately. Belinda at 6 years old could tell her mother, “I feel Yucky.” “Do you want to talk about it?” “No, I just want to go to bed”, she said. “Well, we’ll put you to bed, but if you want to talk about it in the future, I have a special friend who would love to talk about this with you.”

The point is Belinda was allowed and invited to express her feelings. She had been taught to express her feelings. I don’t know how ‘yucky’ translates into Japanese, but it can translate into ‘disgusting’. Now Belinda is a grown up woman about 19, 20 years old and she is healthy, because she was allowed and encouraged to express her feelings at 6 years old and the situation was not buried. These are just 2 examples of teaching children to identify and express their feelings. Those who are aware of feelings and have not buried the shame of abuse or fear of bullying can heal faster.

A great educator named Abdu’l-Baha was once asked, “What is the purpose of life?” He said, “The purpose of life is to develop the virtues.” My message today is not only to encourage children to share their feelings, but to encourage them to learn the virtues at the same time. One virtue that I have had to learn is ‘forgiveness’. At some point in my journey of healing, I learned to forgive my mother and father. Remember earlier I said that the goal of childhood is to identify all the feelings. Then the goal after 15, 16, 17 years old is to have love, compassion, and virtues to be umbrella over all those feelings. Because feelings are just feelings, they just tell us about what is going on inside of us. They do not determine our behavior. And choices must be made based on virtues. We

have much to learn from who had been abused. People who had been abused have difficulties with the virtue of 'trust'. They have difficulties with 'forgiveness'. But they can teach us much about the virtue called 'detachment'. Detachment can lead us to purity of motive. Detachment can lead us to peace. Detachment can lead us to understanding of our behavior and choosing behavior, and can lead to world peace. I believe that the suffering people of the world can teach us much about peace. If you look at the list of feelings, you'll see some of them seem to be negative. Some of them might be feelings that bullies have. The reason they are there, is so that we will learn that human beings have two natures. We have a spiritual nature. And we have a physical nature. The feeling that you see that might be negative, might be expressed by our physical nature. That is why we need the virtues. If we are compassionate, we may not be indignant when someone injures our feelings. If we look into ourselves, we would know that we have the same feelings that any other human being has. Our great educator and philosopher said, "All the people of the world are one." Many educators have said to be kind to your enemy. So I'm going to end this program this afternoon with thanking you for coming. I think I've run out of things to say. So if you have any question, I'll take questions now. I'll think immediately of things to say. Thank you.

**Question:** When my child showed his/her anger, I said to him/her why he/she is so mad at such a simple thing. Eventually he/she ended up with that he/she doesn't want to talk about it anymore. I think there might be a boundary of a child as a human being, and no one is not allowed to invade it without his/her permission. How do you think about it?

**Answer:** If a child shows his/her anger, please ask him/her, “Are you mad? You seem to be mad, are you?” And say, “Sometimes mom gets mad, too. Let’s show angry faces together.” I’ve created some children songs. I’ll sing one of them for you.

“Let your inside feeling match your outside face. So you don’t become invisible. Learn to share your feelings when you really get mad, and you won’t feel so terrible. It’s a sad, sad feeling to be all alone. When you need a hug, but your heart’s a stone. So tell a friend what’s deep inside. It’s Ok if you want to cry. (Name) you can’t hide, so let your feeling show outside.”

Let them know that it’s not the anger that is bad. It’s the behavior. I know 18 yrs. old boy was so angry that he put his fist through the wall and made a hole in it. The anger wasn’t wrong. But he needs it to have an opportunity to express without his mother getting mad at him. He needs to express it in appropriate ways. Don’t be afraid of anger. Face the fire. Face the dragon. So you can encourage them to regulate it.

**Question:** I sometimes feel guilty or incapable as a parent...

**Answer:** You need to develop forgiveness for yourself as a parent. We are taught in many cultures to blame ourselves for whatever goes wrong. Women are the first educators of children. So therefore, they feel that they are doing everything wrong. They don’t usually have enough support. But you are doing a good job. We blame ourselves and we allow others to blame us. Would you forgive your best friend? Would you forgive

your child? If you can, then you can forgive yourself. Parents need support. That is why you are bound together as parents and teachers. The answer isn't blame. The answer is tools and powers. I blamed myself for 15 yrs. and finally I went to a parenting course. My mind exploded with new ideas. Then I went home to try to use it. My 12 year old boy said, "Oh, mommy, you just learned that out of a book." And I did. There is a woman's poster that I created. I want to tell you about.

"If a woman pursues her good against all odds, Under the harsh gaze of all those she loves, All those who love her, all those who don't care for her, Even those who don't know her... Giving them their right to judge her every moment, Every memory, every mistake on the way... And still find a way to love herself, Take responsibility for her growth, And continue pursuing her good, and the greater good, She will find that her self-esteem is a light that radiates from within, not from without! I have this and I wish it for you." (Phyllis K. Peterson, 1991) When I wrote that, I had the courage to stand up to the judgments of anybody. I stand up with the judgment of my parents. I stand up with the judgment of my brothers and sisters. If I didn't, I wouldn't be gone from my husband for 2 weeks. I'm a tough lady! (laughter)

**Question:** Recently I am trying to conquer or overcome anger. I used to show my feeling only by my behavior, but I realized that it makes much easier if I use words openly express my feelings. For example: When I am tired, I didn't tell it to my children but act like I am tired. Now I tell them that I am tired and without telling any further my children began to help me. Don't you think it has related to your talk?

**Answer:** Yes, it does have a strong relationship to what I said. Mothers and Fathers can't put themselves upon pedestals. My mother never said, "I'm tired." Consequently, I worked till I hurt my body. I didn't know I was tired. It is healthy to tell children what you are feeling. It's not healthy, however, to lean on children emotionally. It's not healthy for the Mama to tell children, "I'm depressed." We have friends for that. Relatives, husbands, sisters and brothers can help, too. Children are too young and tender hearted to deal with such problems. They don't have the emotional resources to deal with such problems. They are naturally empathetic. Emotions are not to be repressed. They are not to be controlled. They are simply to be regulated. Do you see the difference between that? We always have different feeling impulses. They give us information about ourselves.

If a 10 year old boy, like the woman said, is expected to control his/her anger 24 hrs. a day, he would eventually explode. When I exploded at my boss, I was fortunate that he understood feelings. If a 10 year old boy exploded in the school compound, it's a different story. So children need outlets for anger.

**Question:** How do you think about the social factors that cause more of those abuse cases to happen?

**Answer:** The world is gaining greater awareness. These things have been going on for decades in secret. In the USA, one out of 4 girls is sexually abused. One out of 7 boys are

molested before they are 16 or 18. In South Africa, in the report of the cases of child sexual abuse, 33% of it is done by the school teachers. In India, 25% of population has been sexually abused before the age of 16. There is child sexual slavery in India and Thailand. (There are similar reports on other countries, too.) In Brazil, a child is sexually abused in every 30 minutes. It is a world wide epidemic. The reason that I give you the statistics is to tell you that though I'm not a healer, I teach people prevention. I have another program that teaches prevention. Sharing feelings is an integral part of prevention. So it addresses the social problems. We can't be a world society or world global society of people who do not express their feelings. What do you see around the world right now is but rage and war. Look at the youth who rioted in France last year. Look at the fact, that there are 400,000 cases of bullying reported each year in a so called civilized country like Great Britain. These are angry children. So I implore you as parents and teachers to teach your children to express their feelings openly.

**Question:** Do you think have there been these cases before and just recently does it reveal its reality owe to the IT development?

**Answer:** It has been there before. The world is going through a moral crisis right now. Each school, each family and each community has to address the moral issues of the days in which we live. We can't live in a moral free society. And we can't be morally neutral. That is why I travel and teach. I could stay home and just watch TV. I taught in China last year where I spoke at the UNESCO conference and presented a program called Protective Behaviors for Children. And I stayed 5 extra days, so I can teach teachers and

principals the Protective Behaviors in the class room setting. I hear Japan has a wonderful program that they have implemented called CAP (Child Abuse Prevention). Australia is the leader in child abuse prevention.

**Question:** I am teaching the 6th grade, 41 children. The list of virtues is very useful. But I am struggling teaching children morals because they can't catch the meaning of virtues. They are just joking around and can't take it seriously. It seems chaos to me. Do you have any suggestion for this?

**Answer:** There is a wonderful book called "Family virtues guide". Please refer to: <http://www.virtuesproject.com> for more information. Treating virtues as a joke happens in America, too. This virtues project has exercises, games, and projects. It can guide the teachers in the way of teaching virtues in many ways. What I don't know how to do is to deal with behavior problems. Parents, teachers, and communities, all have to work together. Parents are taught to be educated in virtues and demonstrate them at home. The teacher has to be educated in virtues and demonstrate patience, forgiveness and firmness. The small community needs to be informed, so that parents work together and teachers work together with the children. As far as children losing their interest, I know that children today have very short attention spans. And the media affects the children's attention span. I'm not blaming the media, but everything like feelings has to be regulated and to be moderated. If a child watches TV 4, 5 hrs. a day, they don't get a chance to express their feelings. They are like Zombies. Parents watch TV 4 hrs. a day, they are like

Zombies, too. They miss opportunities to have family intimacy. And it's so hard when there are so many children.

**Question:** We have children from Elementary and Junior High schools in our community. There are some children who have troubles within their hearts. They tend to exclude other children and tell lies. But I don't want to label the children as bad children. I prefer to treat them as equal. How should I treat these children? Do you know any best ways?

**Answer:** Tough question. I repeat. The world is going through the moral crisis right now. Our job is to show kindness to everyone. And show compassion and love to everyone. Are you worried about protecting your own children? (No...) I pray for people that I am worried about. And I teach whatever corner of the world I find myself in. I can't heal bullies. I'm here to teach you about feelings, prevention of bullies. I wish I could heal bullies. There are a lot of bullies in the world I would like to heal. The world is going through a moral crisis. And my part is the prevention and teaching about feelings and virtues. And virtues can help. Virtues must be taught simultaneously with feelings because of our dual nature...a physical nature and a spiritual nature. Reach the children you can and trust in a higher reality. Thank you.

Note: Excerpts from "Assisting the Traumatized Soul" and "Healing the Wounded Soul" used by permission of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States of America.