

ARE MY
Kids
ON TRACK?

*The 12 Emotional, Social, and Spiritual
Milestones Your Child Needs to Reach*

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What saved me was that I found gentle, loyal and hilarious companions, which is at the heart of meaning; maybe we don't find a lot of answers to life's toughest questions, but if we find a few true friends, that's even better. They help you see who you truly are, which is not always the loveliest possible version of yourself, but then comes the greatest miracle of all—they still love you.

Anne Lamott

We're profoundly grateful for the many folks who've helped us stay on track over the years . . . predominantly our families, friends, and the staff at Daystar. Thank you for allowing us to share your stories and try your patience as we've written this book. We are more because of your love and companionship.

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INTRODUCTION

“Is my baby rolling back and forth?”

“Does she respond to her name?”

“Can he sit up on his own?”

Questions.

The journey of parenting is full of questions. More questions than answers. The first time a pediatrician enters the hospital room, you'll find yourself asking and answering questions. It starts with questions about feeding, sleeping, and, of all things, bowel movements. Who knew there was so much to say about meconium?

“How do I know if she is getting enough milk?”

“How much will my newborn sleep?”

“How often should he have bowel movements, and what color should they be?”

We join forces to track height, weight, sleeping patterns, feeding schedules, colic, jaundice, reflux, stools, alertness, reflexes, immunizations, and on and on. And this is just the first few weeks.

Many times our questions are infused with hope. At times they are wrapped in fear.

The questions become framed by milestones. Developmental milestones are benchmarks allowing us to track healthy growth, specifically whether our kids are reaching milestones on time. When movement is slow or milestones are missed, we have more questions.

These questions—the ones about rolling over, pulling up, sitting, crawling, standing, etc.—allow us to track their *physical* development. Once our children step into an academic setting, we have the ability to track their *cognitive* development, where we can measure IQ, working memory, processing speed, and even pinpoint if a child is reading at a second-grade level, third month, and fourth week. Between the school and the doctor's office, we track a child's cognitive and physical development—charting progress, logging percentages, identifying gaps, and layering support. We have the mind and body covered.

But what about the heart?

Three areas lacking in well-defined milestones are our kids' emotional, social, and spiritual development. These are some of the most vital categories where our kids' growth is concerned. It's from this place our kids operate as sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, friends and companions. How our children develop emotionally, socially, and spiritually determines who they are as husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, friends and co-workers.

Can your adolescent son take ownership when he makes a mistake, or does he blame someone else?

Can your daughter voice her needs without manipulation?

Do you have a school-aged child still having meltdowns like a toddler?

Does your teenager have a foundation of faith as he prepares to step into young adulthood?

Getting Stuck

We're looking for evidence that kids are *progressing toward* emotional and social milestones. As with physical and cognitive benchmarks, if we can't see forward movement, it could be a good time to put another set of eyes on the situation. As counselors, with a combined seventy years of experience, we come together with families every day to look at how children and adolescents are growing emotionally, socially, and spiritually. Sometimes kids get stuck and we have to jump-start the process.

Sadly, we've seen countless parents who got stuck somewhere in their own development. We all know an adult man who acts like an adolescent boy. Turn on any episode of *The Real Housewives of _____* (fill in the city) and catch a group of middle-aged women acting like middle school girls. There are living, breathing examples all around us of adults who never hit emotional or social milestones and are still operating from where they got stuck.

Years ago we worked with a family during a difficult divorce. The father of this family was a successful physician. He wasn't just a successful doctor, he was also an entrepreneur. He'd purchased investment properties across the city, which had yielded hundreds of thousands of dollars. From an outside perspective, he looked highly successful. He'd attended a prestigious medical school. He owned a beautiful home in an affluent part of the city. He sent his children to some of the top private schools. He'd taken his family on countless vacations across the globe.

Sadly, once you pulled back the curtain, his wife described him as arrogant, self-serving, and volatile. She shared stories of nurses who'd left his practice, investment partners who'd dissolved partnerships, and a marriage that had been "hanging by a thread" for years. He was an impossible employer, business partner, and spouse.

The children described their father as angry, explosive, and demanding. They shared stories of him starting arguments with

their mom in public places—restaurants, soccer games, and school events, sometimes within earshot of the kids’ coaches, teachers, friends, and other parents. He had the impulsive, explosive, volatile responses of a teenage boy. This brilliant, well-educated man had developed a pattern of demanding his way, and most individuals would cower and accommodate him. He’d react, blame, and punish the people in close proximity.

In family sessions, the father showed little to no evidence of practicing empathy or the ability to regulate his emotions. When challenged to revisit one of their volatile public exchanges, he consistently struggled to step into his children’s shoes and imagine witnessing conflict from their perspective. He had little awareness of self. Working with him felt identical to sitting with a middle school boy who hasn’t mastered reciprocity, empathy, or regulation. Teenage boys are vulnerable to getting stuck in a pattern of blaming everyone around them for their problems—parents for being too strict, teachers for being “against” them, and the list goes on.

This man missed some vital emotional and social milestones. No one leaned in close enough to identify that he was racing ahead academically and physically but was underdeveloped emotionally and socially. But it became apparent to everyone (spouse, children, co-workers, business partners, friends) once he began train-wrecking every relationship within reach.

Progressing Toward

At Daystar, where the three of us practice, we also work with families led by parents who are invested, intentional, and deeply interested in supporting their children. As we spend time with different kinds of parents, we find that the ones who’ve done their own emotional work are best equipped to support their kids emotionally. As parents, we can only offer as much as we have to give ourselves. If we never made it past sixteen emotionally, it will be

impossible to walk our kids into healthy adulthood. How could the wealthy doctor ever teach his children to navigate conflict constructively? How could his children develop a road map for healthy relationship with the opposite sex when every female nurse ended up quitting and their own mother couldn't live in the same house with the man? How would they learn what it looks like for an adult to make a mistake (a normal part of life) and take ownership (a necessary skill)?

We have to become emotionally, socially, and spiritually developed adults before we can walk our children toward these milestones. If you're thinking some version of "Uh-oh," or maybe your spouse is nudging you in the arm at this moment in the book, don't fear!

Our game plan is to break down four emotional, four social, and four spiritual milestones. We will define those milestones and discuss the stumbling blocks in getting there and the building blocks for reaching them that are unique to each gender. And we'll identify practical ways to help our kids get there.

We hope to help you examine your past and the effect it has on your present as a parent. We believe kids learn more through observation than information. They need to watch us moving toward healthy adulthood—emotionally, socially, and spiritually—in order to have confidence and hope in their own journey.

We aren't looking for evidence of mastery or perfection, in you or your children. No human being responds with empathy in every moment of life. Kids are going to have emotional meltdowns at times. They are going to struggle with awareness and boundaries in different situations. We're looking for evidence that they are demonstrating the skills with some consistency, and the skills are becoming more developed over time. Any time we see kids trending backward more than forward in any category of their development, it's worth asking some questions or putting another set of eyes on the situation.

We often talk about parenting out of love instead of fear. When we linger with questions for an extended time, we inevitably end

INTRODUCTION

up parenting more out of fear. We believe our kids never get the best of us when we're trapped in fear. Our desire is that this book would move you away from fear and toward hope, providing you partnership with folks who care deeply about kids and families.

Let's explore milestones together.

1

EMOTIONAL VOCABULARY

If you were to walk into *any* kindergarten classroom across the globe, there would be a common denominator—no matter the city or state, country or culture, regardless of the language spoken. We're referring to the letters of the alphabet. Every wise early educator knows that having the letters of the alphabet in a prominent place within the classroom reinforces recognition, strengthening the cognitive connection in developing mastery of language. Letters form words. Words form sentences. Sentences form paragraphs. These are the building blocks of language.

The objective is simple. The more kids *see* the letters, the more familiar they become. Classroom teachers will point to them, sound them out, use letters throughout the curriculum to strengthen the connections being made. Parents of early learners will watch as their children trace over the shape of the letters framing the classroom walls. Little hands will grip pencils to form the lines and curves making up the letters of the alphabet, further strengthening the connections.

Familiarity with the alphabet allows children to recognize and script letters, making the tasks of reading and writing second nature. If we labor in these areas on the front end, children become skilled readers and writers, mastering the building blocks for all future academic work. It would be a gift to children to approach emotional development in a similar way.

Any time we've spoken on *any* topic related to kids, a parent will ask a question about a child who spirals, melts down, acts out, comes unhinged, or "completely loses it." The question is about a child's ability to regulate emotionally. Learning to regulate (Perspective) is not all that different from learning to read or write. It's an emotional skill rather than a cognitive skill, but the building blocks are similar. We begin with teaching kids *feeling words* (Vocabulary), that lead to *statements* like, "I feel sad that my sister won't play with me." These statements then lead to *actions* (Resourcefulness), or taking the emotion to something constructive. These are the foundational building blocks of emotional development.

When kids don't have an emotional vocabulary, or haven't been coached in taking the emotion to something constructive, they don't have the skills to regulate themselves in moments of elevated emotion. Expecting them to do so without these basic skills would be as foolish as handing a copy of *Charlotte's Web* to a two-year-old and asking her to read aloud. The child doesn't know letters, words, or sentences. We have to first teach the building blocks and identify any stumbling blocks that may be in the way. We'll define the milestones clearly and provide a checklist for helping kids progress toward the milestones.

Making Emotional Literacy a Priority

It all starts with the milestone of **Vocabulary**, the ability to read and articulate our own emotions as well as the emotions of others. *Emotional literacy is a prerequisite to regulation, practiced*

empathy, resourcefulness, and healthy interpersonal relationships. Lean in to that statement. If it is true, then as parents, educators, and people who care about children, we should feel a *strong* sense of urgency to weave emotional literacy into the daily rhythm of our families and classrooms. Prioritizing these milestones will shape who our kids become as people.

We can't help but wonder: If these milestones became priorities in our homes, and social emotional learning was a part of curriculum like math and science, would there be a massive shift in the divorce statistics, the thousands of individuals who enter treatment for substance abuse or eating disorders, the billions of dollars being funneled into the porn industry, the millions of dollars spent on dieting, and dozens of other ways Americans avoid, deny, and attempt to suppress emotion?

Can you imagine the cultural shift that could take place if children grew up with a strong emotional vocabulary, and we *prioritized* teaching them how to navigate emotion in a healthy way? What if we devoted ourselves to emotional development the way we commit to youth sports in the U.S.?

Now, before you toss this book across the room over that last question, please hear us strongly endorse the benefits of extracurricular activities for kids and the well-documented benefits of organized sports. Not only are these beneficial contexts for children developing physically, but they are valuable platforms for helping kids develop emotionally and socially—perseverance, teamwork, grit, navigating defeat, building endurance, etc.

We simply challenge you to see these milestones as some of the *highest* priorities in our children's development and consider the necessary sacrifices to accomplish that goal. One sacrifice might be looking at your twelve-year-old son following a fit of anger and saying, "Committing to, paying for, and driving to soccer is something I do for *respectful* and *responsible* kids. I won't be taking you to practice today. You'll need to call your coach and let him know you made choices resulting in missing practice today. I don't know what his consequence will be, but I'll support

whatever it is. And I'll follow up with your coach to make sure you made that call."

Prioritizing these milestones could mean joining the PTA to research character development curriculum, and appealing to the school board to integrate social emotional learning throughout your child's education, where collaboration, compassion, empathy, service, and civility are discussed as regularly as math, science, social studies, and reading.

Prioritizing these milestones in our homes doesn't have to be labor intensive; it can be really fun and breed connection with your kids. It could mean more family movie nights with great conversations afterward. It could involve pancake breakfasts on Saturday mornings with TableTopics questions as part of that time. It could mean holding family meetings once a week where everyone plays a role.

We're going to suggest dozens of ideas to you throughout this book. We'll take the guesswork out of it, in hopes that these practices become part of the fabric of your life together as a family. Most of the ideas will work in a classroom setting, Sunday school, or soccer field as easily as they work around a dinner table. Let's jump in.

Boys and Emotions

It's important to first dispel the myth that girls have more emotions than boys. That couldn't be farther from the truth.

Females can certainly express emotions differently. Many studies identify women as having higher levels of emotional intelligence and a stronger ability to read the emotions of others. Studies also reveal differences in how females respond to emotion, but there is no research to support females have *more* emotions than males.

After reaching puberty, girls do possess more of the prolactin hormone, which contributes to tears and how much people cry. There's a difference in the shape of tear ducts in women and men,

which may or may not contribute to why women are more prone to crying than men.¹ But they don't have more feelings; they simply tend to have a more developed emotional vocabulary, an advanced ability to express emotion, and a stronger ability to read the emotions of others.

Stumbling Blocks for Boys

Stumbling Block #1: Cultural Influences

A range of factors—both physiological and cultural—play a role in our understanding of the differences between boys and girls. With boys, we'll be working against a societal tsunami educating our sons about masculinity and what it means to be a male in this world. Some days I (David) feel underwater in my attempts to fight the messages and images bombarding boys.

As I write this, I'm reminded of a YouTube video sent to me by a friend. The Always brand put together this beautifully crafted three-minute video titled *#LikeAGirl*. The video confronts the cultural message we send to girls *and* boys that running like a girl, throwing like a girl, doing many things “like a girl” is a sign of weakness. The video is a societal experimentation illustrating how prepubescent girls see running as simply something they naturally do, and do well. These beautiful young girls demonstrate running, throwing, fighting, and kicking with power, strength, and vitality.

Our culture will communicate countless distortions to our sons *and* daughters. Many boys believe they are flawed, damaged, or simply less masculine when experiencing strong emotions. They begin working early to suppress certain emotions in an effort to appear more masculine or more in line with culture's understanding of what it looks like to be *fully* male.

I often recommend families watch *The Mask You Live In*, a documentary created by the wise folks at The Representation Project, as a jumping-off point to discuss what it means to be masculine in this world. As a boy navigates his emotional terrain, he'll be

coached in a range of ways that are in keeping with our cultural definition of what it means to be male. He'll feel sad or afraid in a thousand moments and hear coaches, parents, and peers say things like "man up" or "stop crying" or "quit acting like a girl." Rarely is a boy given permission to just feel whatever he is feeling and to know that in that moment he is *fully* masculine.

Stumbling Block #2: Strong Emotions

The longer I work as a therapist and talk with thousands of children and families, the more evidence I continue to see of the role temperament plays in the parenting journey. Perhaps I've never believed more in the importance of paying attention to temperament than I have in my own journey of parenting multiples. Two of my three children are twin boys—born on the same day within three minutes of each other. They share gender. They share genetics. They shared the womb. Still to date, they share a room. With all the shared experiences of growing up in the same environment, their differences couldn't be more pronounced.

They are both intuitive and observant (some might call it a side effect of being raised by a therapist), but one of my sons comes up against many moments in life where his emotions overwhelm him. Feelings rise up in him and he struggles to keep his head above water. It's happened countless times within the walls of our home, in the company of his friends, following a tournament loss, and once in conversation with our pediatrician, to name just a few. He feels *deeply*. Though it feels a bit like a curse to him in this moment of his development, I know enough to know it's a gift that will someday bless his own wife and children. I remind him of this, though he can't fully comprehend that yet.

I've found we often see early evidence of this gift. I recently sat with the parents of a second-grade boy. Paul is the oldest of four children and takes his parents to places of confusion, frustration, and feeling like they've come to the end of themselves. He is a bright, curious, sometimes stubborn, strong-willed young man. His

parents describe him as *full* of emotion: “When he’s happy, *everyone* around him feels it. When he’s frustrated, *everyone* around him knows it.” We talked about how deeply he feels and how it can come out sideways.

They told a story of Paul at two years of age. It was Christmas morning, and his dad was videoing him coming down the stairs toward the family tree. He caught sight of a brand-new train table with Thomas the Tank Engine encircling the track, his *most* wished-for gift. He looked up at his parents with huge eyes that began filling with tears. He was so overtaken by the joy of this discovery, he fell to his knees and collapsed forward, sobbing on the ground. His father shut off the camera as he realized the moment was playing out much differently than they’d expected.

Paul was giving his parents a glimpse into the future. The same boy who was overcome with joy at seeing his beloved train set for the first time at two years old would be the same boy who, at five, six, seven, and eight, would have difficulty regulating his emotions. He’d have hundreds of moments where feelings would erupt inside of him and he’d struggle to weather the emotional tsunami.

Before we can walk him forward, we have to accept, embrace, and celebrate him as a boy who feels things deeply, where most of life’s experiences reverberate loudly inside of him. I’m thankful this young boy has intuitive, intentional, supportive parents who want to understand and celebrate how their son is hardwired. They want to help him navigate his rich, deep interior world.

I’ve met a lot of young men like Paul over the years. I don’t like the idea of referring to these boys as *hypersensitive*. When I meet with boys like Paul, I frame it as a superhero power, like a Spidey-sense. I remind them that they have the ability to enter a room and observe/absorb things other boys can’t. I’ll sometimes show them the scene from *Spiderman* where Peter Parker is discovering his gifts.

I also show boys a scene from the *Man of Steel* movie, where Clark Kent is first stumbling into an understanding of his powers. He’s seated in his elementary school classroom when he hears a

clock ticking and a classmate tapping a pencil like it's in Dolby surround sound. He sees and hears everything around him in high-definition. He can't shut down the fact that his system is in sensory overload. It sends him running out of the room in tears. The scene resonates with many boys who know what it feels like to be flooded with emotions that they struggle to navigate.

Stumbling Block #3: Wild Cards

When this flood of emotions intersects with a limited emotional vocabulary, it's a bit like trying to drive cross-country without a GPS. There's no map for the journey. When there isn't a navigation system in place, we're bound to make wrong turns or end up in a place we never intended to be.

When we don't equip boys with an emotional vocabulary, coach them in taking the emotions to something constructive, and model this for them, we can expect emotions to come out sideways, often with volatility. I frequently consult with parents who reluctantly report to me that their young son (as early as six, seven, or eight years old) has made a statement like

“I wish I was dead.”

“I should just kill myself.”

“I hate my life.”

Rarely would I see a young boy with true suicidal ideation. These statements mean something very different for a six-year-old versus a sixteen-year-old. For many young boys, these statements are what I call a *wild card*. It's his way of telling the adults around him that he's experiencing strong emotions. It's the strongest thing he *knows* to say—the most frightening statement any person could make. He's not progressing toward the milestones of Emotional Vocabulary and Perspective. He's stuck.

Our objective becomes walking him back toward the first milestone with statements like, “I can tell you are feeling a lot of feel-

ings. Let's explore what they are and figure out what to do with them." Do you hear evidence of partnership in that statement?

If you've ever done a trust walk, there are two ways to approach it. The first approach is one person blindfolded and guided by the hand of another person. They may speak commands or simply walk you toward the identified place. Either way, they are in the maze *with* you.

The second approach is one I've always liked less. In this approach, one person is blindfolded and another person yells commands from the sideline: "Turn left. Walk six steps forward and then lift your leg because there's a giant log." In the beginning, boys need us to be in close proximity as they are developing the milestones. In chapter 2, I'll introduce a concept called "The Space." In the beginning, we'll always go to The Space with them, not send them there on their own. They can eventually get there on their own, but make sure they feel your hand on their shoulder when they are first stepping into the maze.

Building Blocks for Boys

Building Block #1: Relationship

It all begins with relationship. In fact, we'd say it begins and ends with relationship. You can read dozens of books, implement a hundred different practices, and attend countless parenting conferences, but it has to all start with connection.

Do I listen without judgment?

Do I listen without correction?

Do I listen without giving unsolicited advice?

I'm currently working with a divorced family with two sons. Their oldest son just left for college. Their younger son is a sophomore in high school. I've been meeting with both boys throughout the transition of separation and divorce, and they've both

experienced a range of emotions. Their mom and dad both want to support them. Their father met another woman. He is convinced this new relationship is going to bring him “the happiness I haven’t known in years.” This new woman has a son of her own—a young, active six-year-old.

I’ve been talking with both young men about what it could look like to approach their father with honesty and respect. One of them wrote a short script on his phone and we role-played the conversation: “Dad, I’m still struggling with the divorce. I feel afraid about you being in another relationship when the divorce hasn’t even been final for a year. I feel angry you’re asking me to spend regular time with a six-year-old I don’t even know. You’re asking too much of me right now.”

Eric, the high school son, finally found the courage to speak with his dad. He dug down deep, through tears, and shared the words he’d written. His dad was able to hear him for a few seconds, and then erupted into, “Don’t you want me to be happy?!” His dad then launched into a “lecture about how I don’t have a clue what he’s been through or what it’s like to be an adult.” I sat with this courageous young man as he wept and tried to navigate feeling dismissed and misunderstood.

Some days I wish grown-ups were required to demonstrate two or three skills before getting their marriage license or birth certificate for their child. Imagine if you had to take a written and skills test the way you do when you get a driver’s license. I think it could be a game changer. Maybe you could go to Relationship Violation School, like traffic school, when you commit an offense like the dad I just mentioned.

I wish it were required to demonstrate the skill of active listening and reflecting back what you are hearing another person saying, with no additional comments allowed. This is a practice most couples are taught in the first session of marital counseling. One simply says, “What I hear you saying is that you feel sad and dismissed when I start giving advice.” This basic practice really can be transforming. Imagine if Eric’s dad had looked him in the eyes

and said, “I hear you saying you are still feeling so many emotions about the divorce. Of course you are. Thank you for reminding me of that.” Imagine how understood and cared for this young man would have felt if his dad had gone a step further and said something profound like, “Will you forgive me for asking more of you than you are capable of right now? What would it look like for me to slow things down and better respect where you are?”

I feel certain this young man would have been in tears either way the conversation went, but it could have been tears from being known and understood, rather than being accused and dismissed. Relationship is the bedrock of emotional development for our children. It’s the fertile soil that allows them to grow into emotionally healthy adults.

Building Block #2: Naming

The next skill one would need to demonstrate on my “Emotional Intelligence Test” would be reading a basic feelings chart. A person would be required to correctly identify feelings, much like reading road signs.

You can find a basic feelings chart online or at your local parent/teacher store. We recently had one designed that we sell when we travel and teach parenting classes. It’s a chart with faces/expressions and the feeling word just below the face. Hang one on your refrigerator, another in the family room, and another in “The Space” (which we’ll discuss in chapter 3). We have parents who travel with one in the glove box of the car. Reference the chart often. Point to the face when you identify the feeling. Have your child point to the feeling he or she is experiencing, and say the feeling word for him if he can’t yet read for himself. Help him differentiate between the faces and feelings.

When you are watching movies together as a family or reading books, pause at different moments within the scene/chapter and ask your child to identify what the person is feeling. When you do this, you are actually killing two birds with one stone. You’re

naming feelings *and* teaching empathy, which we'll talk more about in the next chapter.

Warning!

Let's pause here and speak to the parent who is reading this book and is having thoughts like, *I have a twelve-year-old. We never had a feelings chart and rarely used feeling words in our house. I'm realizing why they come unhinged and can't work through strong emotions without lobbing an emotional grenade on our family.*

Here's some good news. Just as fifty-year-olds born into circumstances that yielded illiteracy can learn to read books for the first time as an adult, so can people of *all* ages develop an emotional vocabulary and learn to navigate emotions.

If you have a tween or teen (or spouse), these same rules apply. Books, music, and films are great teaching tools for advancing these skills.

You may feel foolish pointing to and referencing the chart. Keep at it, even when you see little evidence of progression. Allow emotions to become a part of the vocabulary of your family, and naming to become a ritual—alongside brushing teeth, bathing, and eating vegetables—a nonnegotiable practice that is healthy for the body and something everyone in the family does on a daily basis.

Building Block #3: Exposure

We'll continue to remind you that kids learn more through observation than information. They will learn more from watching you express emotion, point to the feelings chart, and navigate your own emotions than they will from any instruction you give.

They will be reading your face and body. If you say, "I'm not angry; I just need you to listen!" through clenched teeth and with an aggressive tone, they'll be confused. There's a lack of congruence in that exchange. However, if you say, "I feel too angry to talk with you right now. I need you to go to your room, and I'm

going to mine,” you are not only using emotional vocabulary and acting with congruence, you are modeling healthy boundaries, which is one of the social milestones we’ll discuss in the second section of this book.

Keep in mind boys will most likely develop emotionally at a slower pace than girls. Boys commonly outpace girls in gross motor skills, a category of physical development. But in terms of emotional literacy, girls will often outpace boys. The skills of reading, naming, and navigating emotions are often more instinctive to her, but he can learn them. He should learn them. He needs an emotional vocabulary to be relationally successful.

Girls and Emotions

“We don’t know what to do about our daughter. The teachers say she’s perfect at school. She makes good grades, has lots of friends. But the moment school is out, she’s a different person. We didn’t bring her the right after-school snack. Her brother looked at her the wrong way. Everyone and everything is ‘annoying’! It’s tears and yelling the whole way home . . . and some days right up until bedtime. It’s like she reserves the worst of herself for us.”

Does this description sound familiar? As a counselor for over twenty years, I (Sissy) can’t tell you how many times I’ve heard these exact words from parents of girls. Your daughter reserves the deepest, sometimes darkest and most vulnerable parts of who she is for home. In other words, she outwardly suppresses her “negative” emotions and reserves them for you . . . her safest place.

Tara M. Chaplin of the Department of Psychiatry at Yale University School of Medicine studied boys and girls and emotions. “Our findings suggest that there are small but significant gender differences in emotion expressions, with larger gender differences emerging at certain ages and in certain contexts.”²² In infancy, for example, the boys and girls expressed their emotions similarly. But as they grew, the changes became more significant.

Those changes involved both the expression of emotions and which particular emotions were expressed. Basically, girls suppressed their emotions more than boys and were more likely to display only positive emotions. For example, the girls experienced higher rates of both sadness and anxiety, but were more likely to express feelings of joy and cheerfulness. The boys were more likely to show aggression and anger than the girls. These changes, however, were usually displayed primarily in the presence of strangers. In their homes, the girls were much more likely to show a wide range of emotions. Hence the girls who internalize their emotions at school and then cry and shout in the safety of their own homes (and cars).

Believe it or not, the anger you see at home is actually a compliment. Your child feels safe knowing you love her and are not going anywhere. She doesn't necessarily feel that with others and is likely falling prey to one of the primary stumbling blocks for girls in developing their emotional vocabulary.

Stumbling Blocks for Girls

Stumbling Block #1: The Pressure to Please

Hannah grew up under a lot of pressure. There was pressure to do well in school for her teachers. There was pressure to be liked by the girls in her class. There was pressure to do well in dance, mostly for Miss Liza, her favorite instructor. And then there was pressure at home. She had to keep her room clean, and say "please" and "thank you" to her parents so they wouldn't get mad. If they got mad at her, they might end up fighting with each other. She had to entertain her sisters and make sure they never got sad, especially when their mom and dad were fighting. All of this pressure was born out of her desire to please those she loved. And all of it combined to strangle out any chance for Hannah's expression or even awareness of her own feelings.

So how did she handle getting upset or angry? She ate dog bones. Literally. She would sneak behind her couch and eat the family

dog's bones—simply because it was the one thing she could think of that she knew was wrong. She needed some outlet for her emotions, and munching on stolen dog bones was the best and most relieving form that occurred to little Hannah.

As an older child, Hannah allowed herself time limits for what she considered her “negative” emotions. She would give herself ten minutes to feel sad, angry, or disappointed. Then she was done. It was time to go back to worrying about trying to please those around her. As a teenager, Hannah was kind, a strong student, a good friend, an aware and loving daughter, and terribly anxious on the inside. Her safe outlet for her anger had transferred from dog bones to her siblings, who got the brunt of all of the emotion that couldn't be released in ten-minute windows. Hannah had become more adept at stuffing than expressing her feelings, and she and her safest relationships were starting to unravel as a result.

Girls want to please. They are in tune with the relationships around them and will sacrifice their own feelings for the sake of relationship. In order to be loved, girls often believe they need to be positive—to only express emotions like cheerfulness and joy, and leave the negatives to the safety of home, dog bones, and little sisters.

Stumbling Block #2: The Pressure to Perform

At Daystar, we not only offer counseling for children and adolescents. We also offer something we call “parent consults.” Parent consults are like parenting tune-ups. They're not necessarily for parents whose children are in or even need counseling. They're for parents who want to ask questions, dig deeper, and find out how they can better help their child.

In the last five years, I have had an influx of parent consults with parents of preschool-aged girls. Many of these fit a similar profile. The parents describe their daughters as bright, advanced for their ages, and having regular meltdowns. These girls express their sadness and anger—but again, mostly at home. And it's often in similar situations. She gets angry when she can't learn

something fast enough. She yells at her parents when her brother messes up her room. She doesn't like to be told no and abhors getting in trouble. This little girl is a perfectionist in the making. On a preschool girl, perfectionism often looks like anger. For an elementary school girl, it can also meld its way into sadness. At the root of the anger, sadness, and perfectionism is something that is now considered a childhood epidemic in America: anxiety.

Your bright, conscientious daughter wants to get it right. All of it. She also wants to please, but that's not her driving force. She has an unrealistic bar she's trying to reach for her own performance and is constantly frustrated with herself for even the slightest nod toward failure. As a result, she's a ball of anxiety. She is trying so hard—at everything she does. And this trying can serve to stuff her emotions in just the same way that the pressure to please does. The difference in these girls, however, is that the perfectionist is angriest with herself rather than you.

I see girls whose perfectionism manifests in anger, anxiety, sadness, and even OCD-type symptoms, such as tics. Every one of these girls is delightful, bright, and extremely conscientious . . . maybe too much so. They do well and expect themselves to do even better—in school, in friendships, in sports, in their family lives, and in just about every area of life these girls experience. There is simply no room or time for sadness. Or disappointment. Or anger. Or even confusion. It's just too much pressure.

Stumbling Block #3: The Need for Control

I recently met with a girl whose mother had just been diagnosed with Stage 4 lung cancer. The news was devastating and unexpected, as she had never smoked a day in her life. But the cancer was there in her lungs and had started to wind its diabolical way around her heart. This high school girl was devastated. Shocked. Profoundly sad. But the emotion she expressed the most to me and to anyone who asked was . . . you guessed it: anger. We've all done it. It's much easier to be angry than it is to be hurt. Or

disappointed. Or even fearful. What girls have said to me over and over throughout the years is that anger feels more like they're in control, while all of those other emotions just feel vulnerable and open-ended. This high school girl went on to say, "I don't know how to talk to my friends about this. I know they're being nice now. But in a few weeks, they'll move on. I'll still be watching my mom throw up from the chemo and they'll be thinking about their homecoming dates." Do you hear the very understandable anger beneath her statement? She wanted to talk to her friends . . . for them to know how sad she was, but not in a way that left her feeling vulnerable, open to even more hurt than the hurt she was feeling already. She wanted control in a situation where there was none.

And so girls sometimes dam up their feelings with this need for control. Or they funnel their feelings into anger or frustration. The word of choice for these girls in counseling is *annoyed*, especially adolescents. Her best friend chooses someone else to take to Florida for spring break: "She's so annoying. I wouldn't want to go anyway." Her parents decide to divorce after a year-long separation: "I'm used to it by now. It's more annoying than anything."

As David mentioned, we had a dear friend design a feelings chart for us to sell at parenting seminars so that parents can help their kids name their feelings. *Annoyed* is not on the chart. It's not a feeling . . . at least, it's not a feeling that expresses any emotional depth. In graduate school we were told that anger is always a secondary emotion. In other words, something else leads to the anger, such as fear or shame or sadness. Annoyed is more of a tertiary feeling. It's like anger watered down with an even greater desire for control.

Several years ago at our summer camp, Melissa taught the second- to fourth-graders about emotions and why God designed us to experience them. She compared our emotions to the oil light in a car. When the light comes on, you do well to pay attention. Emotions are much the same. Anger, sadness, shame, disappointment, and anxiety, as well as joy, cheerfulness, and excitement, are

all indicators for us. To ignore our feelings is to set up either the ticking time bomb of anger or to create an addictive pattern of numbing and deadening our hearts.

Because girls are more likely to feel these “negative” emotions and suppress them, it is vital that we give them an emotional vocabulary, starting from their earliest years. By the time they’re talking in phrases and sentences, they can be putting words to their feelings. As adults who love them, our job is to help them learn to experience and express their hearts and a full range of their emotions.

Building Blocks for Girls

Building Block #1: Give Her Words

I was that girl. I was the one who did my best at school. I tried hard to make and keep friends. I ran for office in every club and was at every Bible study I could attend growing up. I wanted to be good. And well-liked. But I had no idea how to talk about my feelings. And so I was also that girl who erupted at home. I remember my dad saying to me, “Why is it that everyone we meet talks about how wonderful you are, but at home you’re difficult and sulky?” He was right. By the time I got home from school, all the pressure and the hurt feelings and the insecurities had been bottled up in me for long enough. It was time for them to come out and for me to let down, often with my parents as emotional casualties.

What I wish had happened was this: When my dad noticed that I wasn’t being myself (and not in the middle of an argument), I wish he had pulled me aside and gently said, “Sissy, I feel like something is going on with you. You seem sad. Or angry. Or like maybe you had a rough day.” When I was younger, I wish we had a feelings chart hanging on the fridge in our home. I wish I knew how to say when I was sad or felt embarrassed. I wish I had known the words. I think moving into adulthood and adult relationships would have been profoundly different had this been the case.

I work with a young woman who was sexually abused for years during her childhood at the hands of her cousin. Almost every day for two years, she complained to her mom about a stomachache. She was telling her mom that something was wrong without saying the words. She didn't know how to say, "I'm hurt. I'm afraid. Something is really wrong and I need your help." I wish, for her, that her mom had done a little extra digging. I wish she had realized that, when the doctors said nothing was physically wrong, her daughter's stomachaches were their own form of an oil light. I wish she could have said, "Honey, I think you're feeling a lot and your feelings are living in your tummy because you haven't been able to say them out loud. What are you feeling?"

We need to give our girls words. We need to point them toward feelings charts and talk about our feelings around the dinner table. We need to listen with our ears but even more so with our hearts. Pay attention to her tearfulness. Notice when she's more irritated than other times. Does she seem to withdraw on Sunday nights before the school week starts? Maybe something at school is difficult for her emotionally—not just academically. A wise friend of ours says that one of the most important tasks a parent can learn is to ask good questions. And those are not yes or no questions. They're more open-ended. Not "Did you like _____?" but "What was _____ like?"

Building Block #2: Give Her Safety

After sitting with thousands of girls over the years and listening to their emotions, I have come to believe that all girls, if they're honest, worry that they're either too much or not enough . . . or fall somewhere in between. We'll come back to this idea in the chapter on Boundaries. Rambunctious girls who are running from their emotions are asking themselves questions such as "Does he think I'm weird?" "Does she get tired of me?" "Am I too much?"

A girl who tries to please or perform is working hard to make everyone around her happy. She's working hard to be smart . . .

and lovable . . . and brave . . . and perfect. Basically, she's working hard to prove that she's worthy. She's worried she's not enough.

You probably fall somewhere along this continuum, too. We all do. As relational as girls are, they often define themselves by where they fall along this continuum of too much or not enough. The older they get, the more that definition comes from their peers and less from you. Their success has to do with how their friends see them. Their enjoyment of a birthday party has to do with who talks to them and who doesn't. A hard day at school can mean that no one wanted to play with them on the playground or sit by them on the bus. Their enjoyment, their success, and their self-worth are dictated by where they fall on this continuum and, for most girls, they almost always see themselves falling short. We want to—need to—give girls something else to define themselves by besides the whims of relationships, especially those of other fickle, fearful little girls.

As your daughter is developing her emotional vocabulary, she needs to feel safe. She needs to feel safe to feel more than cheerfulness and joy. She needs to feel safe to fail. To not be happy all the time. To say the wrong thing. She needs a safe place to be more than just the buttoned-up, nice, smiley, positive, muted version of herself that girls can start to feel their peers (and even sometimes we) expect them to be. She needs to hear you say truths with your words and actions—truths such as:

“You are enough whether you win or lose.”

“You are enough whether other girls tell you that or not.”

“You are enough whether boys tell you that or not.”

“You don't have to be anything more than you are. You are loved more than you can ever imagine, just the way you are this minute.”

“You are still just as loved when you mess up.”

“It's okay to fail. Everyone does. I do.”

“Your beauty is much deeper than the way you look.”

“You are much more than nice.”

“You don’t always have to smile.”

“You are strong, but you don’t always have to be.”

“It’s okay to be angry.”

“It’s okay to feel sad.”

“I want to know what you think.”

“I want to hear what you feel.”

“Feelings aren’t right or wrong. They’re feelings.”

“You’re not too much. We’re big enough to handle all of the emotion you’ve got.” (We’ll get to the part about regulating those emotions later.)

“God is big enough to handle all of your emotion, too, and wants to hear your heart.”

“You are amazing and delightful and exactly who God intended you to be AND you are a mess at the same time. It’s not either/or. It’s both/and.”

This, obviously, is not an exhaustive list. It’s just a few of the truths we believe girls need to hear from you—as the adults who love them. Add to the list more sentences you know your daughter needs to hear. We want girls to feel safe talking to us about what they think and feel. They won’t learn to speak the words unless they feel they have a safe place to do so.

Building Block #3: Give Her Models

Where do you believe you are on the too-much or not-enough continuum? Take some time to think about it. Talk about it with your spouse or a friend. Does that sound scary to do? Then you may be struggling with your own emotional vocabulary.

For her to start talking to you about her emotions, she needs for you to relate to her emotionally. What feelings do you talk about around the house? Do you shy away from the more “negative” emotions? If she sees that you can be sad and then are okay,

if she sees you get angry and then talk yourself down from that anger, she is seeing someone who is in touch with their feelings and learning how to work through them in a constructive, healing way.

Michele is struggling with pretty severe depression. She believes she's not enough, although she is one of the most outstanding young women I know. She loves her family and worries that her parents will be disappointed with her because of her depression. Michele's dad is one of the most positive men I've ever met. He's a successful businessman and very well-respected in the community. Every time she's sad, he tells her she needs to come up with five things she's grateful for. Now, we agree that gratitude can be a fantastic antidote for sorrow. But only after the sorrow has been talked about. This high school girl has interpreted her father's pressure to be positive as failure on her part. She believes she's doing something wrong because she's depressed. For him to allow her to talk about her own sadness and even share a little of his would alleviate a tremendous amount of guilt she feels daily.

Give your daughter a model. Give her several, actually. She needs women and men in her life who live out strength, courage, and confidence, as well as vulnerability and even sadness and anger. She needs to know through your life and your words that emotions are a vital part of who she is and how God has made her. She needs a safe place to try out and express those emotions. And she needs you to hope for and with her in the midst of them, to remind her that she's going to be okay, and point her toward the One who truly does want to know and care for every hair on her head—and feeling in her heart.

Conclusion

Emotional vocabularies are essential for both boys and girls, beginning in their earliest stages. When we first started talking about this book, we knew this needed to be our first chapter because we believe it's where the other milestones begin. To have healthy

friendships, to stand up for himself on the playground, to stand up for herself on a date, to eventually have a marriage that works, a family who knows how to communicate with each other, the ability to express himself in the workplace, your child has to learn to express what he feels. You are her first and most foundational teacher. And you're his first outlet, as well. Help him find his way to outlets, verbal and nonverbal, that are appropriate and productive. Help her find ways to express what she feels that are honest and free of stumbling blocks. As counselors, we can truthfully say that a huge percentage of the issues we see in families revolve around those families not having their own emotional vocabularies. Start now. It's never too late. Help them know how to share their hearts with you and with others. And they need you to share yours, as well.

PRACTICAL IDEAS

for Building an Emotional Vocabulary

1. Feelings chart. Purchase one (or several) to place in strategic places throughout your home, and possibly a copy to keep in your family vehicle for the ride home from school.
2. Books. Choose books that are rich in emotional content. A few children’s authors we respect and who do a particularly good job in this area are Kevin Henkes, Cynthia Rylant, and Eric Carle. Their work for very young readers is layered with emotional content.
3. Movies. Choose movies that are rich in emotion. The benefit of animated films is that the characters’ expressions are larger than life—their eyes and mouths are easier to read for younger children learning to identify expressions.
4. Conversation. Allow emotional vocabulary to become more a part of your family’s dialogue. Reflect back feeling statements in conversations between spouses in front of your kids. And reflect back feeling statements to your kids. When they can’t/won’t access those words, begin the conversation with, “It seems you are feeling _____.”
5. Make feelings a part of dinner conversation. Have each person name one thing they felt today. They can name one positive feeling and then one negative.

6. Role-play. Play is a child's work. Role-play is a powerful tool for helping kids develop emotionally and socially. When your children invite you into their play, pretend to be sick, hurt, or scared and observe how they respond. Validate them when they use feeling words, reflect-back statements, or respond with empathy.
7. Use art as an added tool. If your child is having trouble expressing their emotions, hand them a sheet of paper and have them draw what they're feeling.
8. Resources. Read Sissy and Melissa's *Raising Girls*, and *The Curse of the Good Girl* by Rachel Simmons, if you have a daughter. If you have a son, read *Wild Things* by David Thomas and Stephen James and *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys* by Dan Kindlon and Michael Thompson.
9. Play games. For younger kids, try "How Would You Feel If . . ." Fun Deck Cards, and others by Super Duper Publications. For older kids, try the Ungame (comes in kids, teen, or family version) or TableTopics (just make sure they're age appropriate). Melissa & Doug also have several great boxes of questions.