

Your Child's Emotional Health

THE ESSENTIAL GUIDE TO EVERY FACET
OF A CHILD'S PSYCHOLOGICAL AND
MENTAL DEVELOPMENT, FROM BIRTH TO
LATE ADOLESCENCE

Philadelphia Child Guidance Center

Your
Child's
Emotional
Health

**PHILADELPHIA
CHILD GUIDANCE CENTER
WITH JACK MAGUIRE**

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This book is not intended as a substitute for the professional advice of a doctor or mental health professional. The reader should regularly consult a physician or appropriate health care practitioner in matters relating to health, particularly with respect to any symptoms that may require diagnosis or medical attention.

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This book is dedicated to Margie Ouellette
and to her children,
Amanda, Carly, and Brittany.
I am proud to be a part of their family.

Preface

Children seldom say that they need help. More often their behaviors tell us that they do. They may suffer vague, slowly evolving difficulties at home, at school, or with their peers. Or they may exhibit sudden, marked changes in their conduct and mood that pervade every aspect of their lives.

Each year, thousands of children, adolescents, and their families get help from Philadelphia Child Guidance Center (PCGC). As one of the foremost centers in the country for child and adolescent psychiatric care, PCGC offers services that are specialized and individually designed to meet the needs of each child and family. Often working in closely cooperative teams, staff members help families recognize, expand, and mobilize their strengths to make life more fulfilling for the affected child as well as for the family as a whole.

Since PCGC's origin in 1925 as one of the first centers in the world devoted to child psychiatry, it has enjoyed an international reputation for its excellent treatment and innovative research. The founding director, Frederick H. Allen, M.D., was the first board-certified child psychiatrist in the United States as well as one of the first psychiatrists to address the problems of the child in the context of the family. Within his historic thirty-year tenure, PCGC achieved a leadership position in the study and treatment of emotional problems affecting children from birth through adolescence.

Later, under the auspices of Director Salvador Minuchin, M.D., PCGC pioneered the development of structural family therapy, a systems-oriented approach that views diagnosis and treatment of a child in the context of the family and social relationships in which she or he lives. Included in that context are the child's extended family, friends, caretakers, school, and all agencies in the culture at large—social, legal, religious, recreational, and health oriented—that influence the child's life.

Today, under the clinical direction of Alberto C. Serrano, M.D., PCGC's staff of 230 professionals provides a broad range of diagnostic and therapeutic programs that directly benefit the mid-Atlantic region of the United States and serve as models for other diagnostic and therapeutic programs throughout the nation and abroad. Thanks to its strong affiliation with the University of Pennsylvania Medical School, The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, and Children's Sea-

shore House, PCGC is a major component of one of the most advanced health-care and health-care research centers in the country.

This book draws upon the unique experience and expertise of PCGC to offer you, as parents, practical guidelines for raising your child to be emotionally healthy. Specifically, it helps you perform the following, especially challenging activities:

- identify and assess your child's emotional states, problems, capabilities, and needs;
- develop an effective parenting style that best suits you and your child as individuals;
- address the most common and most troublesome emotional difficulties that can arise in the course of your child's life;
- ensure the emotional well-being of all family members during any emotional crisis experienced by your family as a whole or by your child individually;
- determine if and when you, your family, and your child need professional help in managing emotional difficulties;
- secure the professional help that is most appropriate for you, your family, and your child, according to the situation at hand.

Love for a child comes naturally to a parent and can go far toward giving a child emotional security. Parenting skills, however, are also required to meet a child's emotional needs, and they do *not* come naturally. Instead, parents must learn them.

This book is specially designed to help parents help themselves so that they in turn can help their children. Underlying everything that PCGC does—and represents—is the belief that family members have the ability to work together to solve their problems and that each family member can achieve a new and more rewarding life in the process.

Acknowledgments

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Part One:

The

Early

Years

BIRTH TO AGE SIX

Introduction

The human memory relies on words and language skills to identify, record, and preserve all that an individual may encounter in life. It is small wonder, therefore, that most adults have very sketchy memories of their childhood before they began school and almost no vivid memories of it before they began to speak.

The early years of life have a mysterious and elemental quality that an adult can only recapture by caring for children who are going through them. Within this special caretaking relationship, adults learn again to see the world in nonverbal ways, and they confront anew the tremendous turmoil of an existence governed so much more by raw feelings than by processed thought. It's a learning and confrontational process for adults that is not only inspiring to their lives as individuals but also vital to their effectiveness as parents.

In emotional terms, the years between birth and age six for a child are the best of times and the worst of times. Periods of paradisaal bliss and security, seldom to be realized in later years, alternate wildly and unpredictably with times of unspeakable torment and despair, the likes of which are rarely, if ever, experienced by adults.

A parent is never more important to a child's physical and emotional well-being than during this time span. Therefore, it is critical that parents enter into their very young child's world single-mindedly and wholeheartedly, progressing with her or him through that world as safely and delightfully as possible.

Fortunately, the most effective aid a parent can offer a very young child is also the easiest to offer: love. In the absence of any other surety, love alone can guide both parent and child through the darkest emotional crisis. To ensure that it stands the best chance of doing so, here are three other general truths to keep in mind about the overall emotional life of children under six:

1. Every human being is born into life with a unique temperament and begins exhibiting a distinct personality right away.

The mind of a baby is not a blank slate, awaiting the impress of time and experience to produce a characteristic "self." At birth, an infant

already possesses a personal temperament, which can be defined as an innate set of tendencies to act and react in certain ways. Throughout life, this “core” temperament will determine whether she or he is basically easygoing or high-strung, tough or vulnerable, meek or bold, playful or serious, sociable or individualistic, and many other qualities that words are hopelessly clumsy in defining.

From a parent’s point of view, this means remaining ever aware of the fact that a child under six is a person in her or his own right. Therefore, much of your relationship with your very young child, from the moment of birth, has to be worked out like any other that exists between two human beings: by identifying, accepting, and appreciating the similarities and differences in your respective personalities.

Your child is not mature enough—or independent enough—to meet you halfway in this process, so you’ll have to be especially understanding to make up the difference. But throughout this process, you shouldn’t expect your child to be just like you, nor should you feel that you are necessarily the “prime mover” of your child’s behavior.

2. It’s far more important simply to pay ongoing attention to children under six than it is to act or react in specific ways.

Parents of very young children are overinclined to be “doers.” So much sheer physical work is required to attend to the basic needs of the child—food, sleep, clothing, shelter, cleanliness, and safety—that parents assume that a similar expenditure of effort is needed to “do something” about a child’s emotional well-being.

In fact, there is much that you as a parent can do to promote and safeguard your child’s emotional health, but overdoing can easily lead to emotional exhaustion for every member of the family. Your first and foremost responsibility is simply to watch over your child. This involves keeping calmly and persistently attuned to her or his moods and behaviors so that you know your child well and, consequently, when it’s appropriate to be concerned.

3. Always remember that a child under six is paying especially close attention to you.

Because they are so dependent on their parents, children this young can be incredibly sensitive to how their parents feel, act, and react. Again, they mentally and emotionally process what they witness in “noncommunicable” ways that are difficult for adults to detect or appreciate.

Although your child under six may not be capable of grasping the “adult” meaning of your moods and behaviors, don’t ever assume that she or he is not “old enough” to be influenced by your moods or behaviors. Be particularly mindful of how you interact with others, cope

with stressful situations, or express your feelings in the presence of your very young child. The more constructively you manage your own life, the better example you will set.

Also, it's important to be honest about your moods and behaviors. Any falseness is immediately apparent and inevitably distressing to a very young child's "unsophisticated" mind. Don't lie about your feelings or actions. And don't deny—either to your child or to others in her or his presence—what your child knows to be true. Always be truthful, and it will serve both you and your child well throughout your lives together.

The information offered in this section of the book is designed to help you develop and enjoy a relationship with your very young child that nourishes her or his emotional health. Specific guidelines are organized according to the following topics:

1. SLEEPING (*Page 17*)

- common sleeping patterns and emotional problems associated with sleeping
- how to manage bedtime resistance, nightmares, and night terrors
- what to do about problems associated with early rising and late sleeping

2. EATING (*Page 30*)

- common eating patterns and emotional problems associated with eating
- how to manage eating resistance, food fussiness, and disruptive table manners

3. SEXUALITY (*Page 33*)

- milestones in sexual development, curiosity, and activity, and emotional issues associated with those milestones
- how to prevent, or cope with, the sexual abuse of your very young child
- how to minimize, or deal with, awkward sexual behavior
- how to avoid harmful gender stereotypes in raising your child

4. SHYNESS AND AGGRESSION (*Page 45*)

- why your child may be basically shy or aggressive and emotional problems associated with these traits
- how to help your child cope with, and overcome, problems relating to shyness or aggression

5. FEAR (*Page 53*)

- how fears develop in very young children; how to recognize them and how to manage them
- a timetable of common fears at different ages
- how to prevent, and deal with, fear associated with a hospital stay
- at PCGC: pain management for very young children

6. DEPRESSION AND STRESS (*Page 64*)

- causes and effects of depression and stress in very young children
- how to prevent, manage, and overcome common problems associated with depression and stress
- how to help your very young child remain emotionally stable through a divorce, a remarriage, a traumatic event, or a death of a loved one

7. SEPARATION ANXIETY (*Page 77*)

- what “separation anxiety” is and why very young children experience it
- how to cope with, and overcome, separation anxiety

8. DISCIPLINE (*Page 81*)

- common disciplinary challenges and emotional issues associated with them; general guidelines for handling them successfully
- how to issue commands effectively
- how to handle the “gimmies” and the grabs when shopping with your very young child
- how to manage whining and tantrums
- how to evaluate and enhance your child’s ability to self-discipline