

Daily Feelings ‘Check-Ins’ with ourselves and children

If you could prevent your child’s daily 5pm meltdowns or yourself from snapping at your partner, would you try?

We live in a mostly invalidating world where it’s not common to express inner experiences and feelings; the research says that this is why the U.S. is one of the most indebted, addicted, depressed, and anxious populations in the world.

We may mistakenly believe that if we slow down and acknowledge ours and our children's unpleasant feeling states, we worsen the feelings, BUT THE OPPOSITE IS TRUE. When we give ourselves and our children the opportunity to ‘just be’ with acceptance and compassion, we feel deeply comforted, which fosters emotional resiliency.

All feelings must have a place to go, and when feelings are suppressed or avoided, we eventually explode either internally or externally: meltdowns, anxiety and depression symptoms, picking and pulling habits, snapping, fighting, yelling, binge drinking and eating, etc.

When we intentionally ‘check-in’ with ourselves and our children, we ‘*release the valve*’ within our emotional worlds that may prevent ensuing explosions.

What we reveal, we heal.

This daily journaling check-in process *and* an exercise to connect with our children when we otherwise wouldn’t, gives our children and us:

- 1) the language and permission to feel
- 2) increased understanding of our inner experiences
- 3) the capacity to healthfully express and regulate

Check-in with yourself and your children at minimum three times a day (am, mid-day, pm). For younger children, try checking-in during calmer moments possibly during car rides, stroller rides - anytime you sense they are chilled out a bit. For yourself, journal in your phone or special notebook, and it helps to put reminders on your phone. With practice, the check-ins become automatic and efficient. The bonus is that with all the practice, we become more prepared to attune and empathize when we and our children are experiencing really big feelings and in need of support.

Below is a step-by-step guide for you and your children, and a real example of a check-in between Olivia (age 4) and me. Had I not initiated this check-in during a car ride when she was

quietly gazing out the window, I know she would not have shared. I am now reinforced consistently to do this with her and her 2-year-old brother, Luca, because I learn something new nearly every day. She seems emotionally steadier with fewer meltdowns, defiance, and clinginess. I'll take that!

Even if the child does not respond at first, please continue. You are planting the seeds in her emotional garden and children will begin to trust and share, especially if they see you talking about your feelings and modeling the practice.

DAILY FEELING CHECK-INS

- **Get Still.**

FOR YOU: This helps settle our minds and our bodies into the checking-in process. Intentionally shift thoughts to the present moment. Immediately focus on the soles of your feet touching the ground underneath. Take about four deep belly breaths. Reach your hands over your head, let them fall forward, and release a huge, loud sigh. As you stand back up, shake out your hands and wiggle around and then settle into a stillness.

FOR KIDS: Notice when they are more relaxed and quieter. For my kids, it's in the car and settled into their car seats, during stroller rides, and after meals.

- **Recognize and Label the feeling.**

FOR YOU:

I AM EXPERIENCING THE FEELING(s) of _____ examples: anger, sadness, jealousy, worry, disappointment, frustration, excitement, eagerness, boredom, joy, etc. (See Feelings Wheel on the main Resources Page.)

FOR KIDS: Look them in the eye, get down on their level, listen with full attention, and gently ask them, "how are you feeling right now?" If they say good or bad, encourage an actual feeling word and give them examples (see Children's Feelings Charts on the Resources Page for Kids).

You can also ask things like, "What was hard for you today? Tell me about something really fun? Anything you would like to do again?" The rose question is one of my daughter's favorites at the end of the day: Tell me about your thorns (harder experiences) and tell me about your petals (ie positive experiences).

Example

Parent: "How are you feeling this morning?"

Child: "I am feeling a little sad actually."

- **Allow the Feeling.**

FOR YOU: Give space to the feeling without moralizing, criticizing, or fixing. Just let it be. Imagine a big open sky and see the feeling fill up the sky.

FOR KIDS: Accept, validate, and reflect the feeling. Pause and let it be without moralizing, criticizing, or fixing.

Example

Parent: "Hmm, I know how sadness feels too. It can hurt your heart."

- **Understand.**

FOR YOU:

I NOTICED: _____

THOUGHTS: _____

Notice any body sensations or behaviors (your shoulders are touching your ears, or your heart is racing, you are fidgety, etc.) and where it is most present in your body (your chest, your head, your arms, your gut, etc.). Is the experience pleasant or unpleasant? Notice any thoughts contributing to the feeling.

FOR KIDS: Get them talking.

Example

Parent: "Tell me more."

Child: "I lost my friends."

Parent: "It sounds like you are really missing your friends, and it's disappointing and confusing since we can't go to school now."

Child: "I don't have any more friends."

- **Investigate.**

FOR YOU:

ARE THE THOUGHTS I AM BELIEVING TRUE? _____

WHAT AM I LIKE WHEN I BELIEVE THESE THOUGHTS? _____

WHAT WOULD I BE LIKE IF I DID NOT BELIEVE THESE THOUGHTS? _____

TURN THE THOUGHT AROUND. _____

Write down the opposite of the thought, example, 'I am a bad person' is turned around to: 'I am a good person that made a mistake.'

FOR KIDS: Give them information and assist them in clarifying any ambiguity they may be experiencing. Brainstorm and problem solve if needed.

Example

Parent: "You did not lose your friends. We just can't see them at school right now."

Child: "Can we go to their houses?"

Parent: "Because of the virus, we can't visit right now, I wonder what we CAN do?"

Child: "I have an idea. Can we FaceTime them like we do our cousins?"

Parent: "Great idea, I will ask their parents and try and set it up."

Child: "Great idea!"

- **Nurture and Regulate.**

FOR YOU:

WHAT DO I NEED RIGHT NOW TO SOOTHE MYSELF PHYSICALLY, EMOTIONALLY, AND MENTALLY? _____

Examples: speak to yourself with kindness, move your body, drink water, connect with another person, go outside, listen to music, etc.

Ask yourself: if you were speaking to someone you love, what would you say or do?
Notice your tone of voice and your body language....

Recognize the common humanity component of your experience and that all experiences come to an end. Feelings are like storms, they always pass.
The human experience is made up of many emotions, many of which are not pleasant.

FOR KIDS: The way we speak to our children is what gives them the language they adopt as their default inner voice when struggling. Use compassionate and kind language.

Example

Parent: "This is a confusing time for everyone. We all feel sad at times, and it's ok, we will get through this. I love you, and I am here for you!"