

## Mother Nurture

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### *Self-Awareness for Kids and Grownups*

*Sometimes I'm with my kids (or driving in traffic or talking to my husband or . . . ) and suddenly I'll start feeling angry or frustrated or sad -- and I don't understand where that came from. Other times, our preschooler will just start lashing out but he can't say what's bothering him. Any ideas?*

Great question! You're talking about self-awareness, which is one of the five essential inner skills (the others are letting go of painful experiences, insight into oneself, taking in positive experiences, and choosing well).

Although these inner skills get much less attention than the outer ones - like long division, writing business letters, or driving a fork lift - they make a much bigger difference in a person's lifetime happiness, income, and contribution to others. So it pays to help children get good at them . . . and to get good at them ourselves. This is a profoundly important idea for every family.

For example, a toddler who can notice early on that she's getting frustrated and go to her mom for comfort is going to be happier (and easier to raise) than one who builds up tension and anger to the point that it explodes and overwhelms her. Similarly, a parent who can sense the softer feelings of being let down beneath the surface of anger is going to be a lot more effective in communicating with his or her partner.

Everybody's self-aware, to some degree -- and here are some ways to get even better at it

#### **For Children**

- Adjusting your feedback to the age of the child, mirror back what he or she is experiencing. For example, you could say "Wheee!" exuberantly in tune with an infant breaking into a smile. Or you might sigh in quiet sympathy with a teenage daughter who's frustrated with one of her friends. Children come to see themselves in large part through being mirrored by their parents.
- Accept your child's experience as it is; that will help him accept it, too, which is necessary for complete self-awareness. Separate what a child is feeling inside, which is always alright, from how he behaves, which can be good or bad.
- Accept that children are usually more aware of themselves than they can put into words; their verbal abilities lag behind their self-knowledge.
- In appropriate ways, describe your own experience to your child, like "Well, mommy feels both sad at missing you while you are in childcare but also happy

at being able to help make money for the family." Get across the idea that feeling two ways at once is normal and OK.

- Take a moment at meals to be aware of oneself and the food - perhaps combined with a religious blessing - before diving in.
- When something is bothering a child, try to get him to describe his experience in age-appropriate detail. Focus on her experience, not the circumstances and what she ought to do. Just that alone often helps a child feel better.

### **For Grownups**

The inner world has its own reality, and you can become a very skillful observer of it as well:

- Take a minute or two at least once a day to check in with yourself and assess the full spectrum of your experience, including your body sensations, emotions, thought, desires, and images.
- Whenever you feel at all upset, do a quick check through the full spectrum of experience described just above.
- Do an honest self-assessment about the aspects of your inner world that you tend to ignore, suppress, deny, disown, or push to the sidelines. People who know you well can help with this. Remember that resisting your experience just makes it persist. The fastest way to help it move on is to open the door wide to it; otherwise, it keeps on knocking!
- Cultivate a daily practice in SOMETHING that centers you in an inner sanctuary of peaceful, interested, kind awareness. Meditation, yoga, or prayer are the preeminent methods for this, but you could also get a lot out of very consciously cooking, gardening, walking, playing music, or making art or crafts. Then, from time to time during the day, take a moment to re-center yourself in this inner sanctuary of simply being.
- Imagine that your experience is a kind of layered parfait, with adult levels on top and younger parts underneath, reaching all the way back to earliest childhood.

Notice your attitudes toward your younger parts; these are often an internalization of your parents' messages. Do you accept those younger parts or push them away? Do you bring kindness to them or meanness? Experiment with being especially kind to them, and see what that's like.

Whenever you're upset, try to sense into the younger layers beneath the surface of frustration, loss, or anger. Your awareness of them will help them flow . . . and move on.

Like any other skill, you get better at the inner ones with practice. Each day has many opportunities to help yourself or your child develop greater self-awareness. Enjoy!

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