



How talking about emotions can help children develop self-awareness

In a lot of children's TV shows the characters display an astonishingly small range of different emotions. Often they're biased towards happy emotions. Or they might show characters in danger - but always being brave and getting through it. One comment that a lot of parents make about *Bing* is that it isn't like that. Bing gets scared, sad, frustrated, jealous - he experiences the same range of emotions as a real-life child.

From my perspective, as a child psychologist who's also a dad to a four-year-old and a two-year-old, this goes right to the heart of why I encourage my children to watch *Bing*. Here's why:

Children aren't born knowing what emotions are. [It's something that they have to learn](#). I've seen this in so many different ways. Watching a child, it can seem amazingly easy for you to tell what they're feeling - but, when you ask the child themselves, they can't describe it to you. In a psychologist's terms, they lack what we call '[metacognitive awareness](#)'. Feeling an emotion, and being self-aware that you're actually feeling that emotion, are two quite different things.



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Most children never get sat down and taught what the different emotions are. So how are they supposed to learn this self-awareness? It's likely not something that they'll be taught at school. This is a shame, because there is [evidence](#) that simply being self-aware about what different emotions are, and what it feels like to experience them, is one of the most effective ways of managing negative emotions.

As parents we naturally hate it when our children get upset. But often we try to help in entirely the wrong way. We might try to 'fix' their emotions - by solving the immediate thing that's upsetting them, then assuming that they'll calm down immediately. Or we might tell them what they should, or shouldn't, be feeling. For example, on the first day of school you often see parents dragging an upset child along by the hand, saying 'it's going to be fine! You're going to have a lovely time and make lots of new friends. Don't be scared!'



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There is a lot of evidence now that [judging emotions as correct or incorrect](#), or trying to inhibit what we're naturally feeling, just isn't an effective way to make negative emotions go away (either for [adults](#), or children.) The technique [that does work](#) is mindfulness – and a key component of that is raising self-awareness about the emotions that you're experiencing in a non-judgemental way.

The reason that I think that watching a show like Bing is really, genuinely important is because watching other children experience emotions helps you to learn what these emotions are. [It's been shown that](#) adults who experience negative emotions can benefit just from watching videos of other adults experiencing the same emotions. And Bing gives you that for free, wrapped up in a fun and entertaining package. That's why I, as a dad, am always happy when they're watching *Bing*.

About the author

Professor Sam Wass studied at Oxford University, London, and Cambridge University, and currently runs the BabyDev Lab at the University of East London.



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