



WHY “YOU’RE OKAY” IS NOT OKAY

A DISCUSSION OF RESPONSES AND REACTIONS

By Olynda Smith

It’s likely you have witnessed this scenario: A child takes a minor tumble or drops his snack and begins to get upset. He looks to his parents, who give him a quieting “You’re okay” before turning their attention away. The child continues to be upset, and the parent repeats the insistence that she is okay. There are a variety of reasons a parent might tell an upset child, “You’re okay”: to comfort and reassure, to avoid a meltdown, or to toughen up the child. It may also be that because this saying is so prevalent, parents assume it is a good practice and adopt it with their own children. While I hear adults

using “You’re okay” almost everywhere—playgrounds, museums, playdates, the library—I have not witnessed it in Montessori environments. There are good reasons that most Montessorians do not use this phrase.

I want to share with you why this little phrase can be so harmful and why I strongly believe that it is in the best interest of our children to avoid using it. While saying “You’re okay” to an upset child is sometimes effective in stemming the tide of tears, it comes at a price most thoughtful parents will not be willing to pay once they understand it.

How we respond to a child when he is upset has a huge impact on his emotional intelligence. Our EQ (emotional quotient or emotional intelligence quotient) includes our self-awareness, self-acceptance, impulse control, and empathy (Markham, 2012, pp. 92–93). These are qualities that Montessorians work to cultivate in the classroom and that most parents hope

impede our children’s ability to know and express themselves emotionally.

Learning how to talk about what is not okay is also essential for healthy brain development. When we encourage children to talk through what is wrong, we help them to engage and develop connections between the right and left hemispheres of the brain. This integration of the hemispheres is essential to our health and happiness. In *The Whole Brain Child*, neuropsychiatrist Daniel Siegel and parenting expert Tina Bryson say, “In order to live balanced, meaningful, and creative lives, full of connected relationships, it’s crucial that our two hemispheres work together” (2012, p. 18). These connections are made when we talk about our emotions: We feel those emotions in the right hemisphere, but to put language to them, we have to engage the left hemisphere. When we do this regularly, we create a capacity to find balance after upset in the short run and a more integrated brain in the long run. “In fact, research shows that merely assigning a name or label to what we feel literally calms down the activity of the emotional circuitry in the right hemisphere” (Siegel and Bryson, 2012, p. 29). In other words, if our goal is to help our child restore calm, the quickest and healthiest thing we can do is listen to him, help him name what is wrong, and let him tell us the story of how it happened. When we do this, we accomplish the short-term goal of calming him down and often avoid the spiral into a tantrum. We also give him tools and the neurological framework to be able to fully feel, honor, and work with his emotions in a healthy way. When we default to “You’re okay” mode, we fail to support him in developing a brain that supports future health and happiness.

And in some cases, saying “You’re okay” to an upset child may actually make her more upset because trying to reason (a left-brain activity) while experiencing a flood of emotions (a right-brain activity) is simply not a very effective strategy. “Steady denial of feelings can confuse and enrage kids...[and] also teaches them not to know what their feelings are—not to trust them” (Faber and Mazlish, 1980, p. 2). Ideally, parents and teachers can first connect with the child through compassionate listening and body language, letting the child know he is safe and that we feel for him. Once we connect and help the child tell his story, usually he will relax. And then, after he has calmed down, we can be more effective in our attempts to problem-solve, set boundaries, or give information. It is “crucial to keep in mind that no matter how nonsensical and frustrating our child’s feelings may seem to us, they are important to our child. It is vital that we treat them as such in our response” (Siegel and Bryson, 2012, p. 24).

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to cultivate in their children. The most effective way to cultivate emotional intelligence is to learn to understand, accept, and work with one’s emotions. This also contributes immensely to a person’s happiness, health, and success. As Dr. Laura Markham states, “The ability of a human being to manage his emotions in a healthy way will determine the quality of his life—maybe even more fundamentally than his IQ. Even a child’s academic success is determined as much by EQ as by IQ” (2012, p. 95).

EQ is like IQ in that we are born with an innate starting point, and it can be strengthened or diminished with nourishment or neglect. Adults can nurture a child’s EQ by helping him talk through his emotions and by listening when he works to explain what he feels. Any moment a child is telling us or showing us that she is not okay is a moment we can use to help build her EQ. And conversely, each time we tell a child she is okay when she is telling us she is not, we diminish her EQ and lose a precious opportunity to help her build her self-awareness, self-acceptance, and empathy. By falling back on “You’re okay,” we actually

When we encourage children to talk about their feelings and to recount their experiences, we also help them cultivate authenticity. Research professor Brené Brown writes that the ability to be authentic—to have the courage to speak your heart and be seen fully—is a key to wholehearted living. “Owning our story and loving ourselves through the process is the bravest thing we will ever do” (2010, p. ix). In her research, she found that people who dared to be vulnerable in this way lived lives full of joy, creativity, connection, and meaning. When we discount a child’s experience, we send her the message that her story isn’t worth telling. When we stop and listen to how she is feeling, we let her know that her experiences and perspective matter. By giving a child many positive experiences of being truly seen by people he loves and trusts, we help him cultivate the courage to be authentic and vulnerable.

Children who have a high EQ, strongly integrated brains, and a deep trusting connection with their parents and other adults will have fewer tantrums, will find calm again more quickly after traumas, and will be able to communicate their needs and emotions more clearly. All of this can make parenting both easier and more enjoyable!

It can be hard to allow ourselves to feel our own emotions, making it difficult to listen and empathize when our children are experiencing strong emotions. But to help our children cultivate their emotional intelligence, we as parents have to raise our own emotional intelligence quotients. This is the gift that the work of parenting constantly offers us—our children give us the inspiration to heal and grow. As Montessori observed so long ago, “It is clear that nature includes among the missions she has entrusted to the child, the mission of arousing us adults to reach a higher level...to a higher plane of the spirit...” (Montessori, 1995, p. 286). As we adults become more comfortable with our emotional lives, it will be easier to have a more refined approach to our child’s upsets. Also, as we grow, our children will start to mirror our growth—literally. “As children develop, their brains ‘mirror’ their parent’s brain” (Siegel and Bryson, 2012, p. xii).

WHAT WORKS

In a nutshell, what works is to treat each moment of a child’s distress as a teachable moment. When your child is expressing that she is hurt, angry, frustrated, or scared (or—on the other hand—happy, excited, or elated), stop and listen. It doesn’t matter if you think she isn’t really hurting. Treat it seriously. Get down to her eye level and give her your full attention. Some

comforting physical contact, like a cuddle or rub on the back, may help.

Next, show you are listening by reflecting back to your child how you think he is feeling. “I hear that you are mad right now!” or, “You are sad. It can be disappointing to have to leave a party before you are ready.” If he is not able to clearly express himself and his feelings, take an educated guess. “I see you are stomping your feet, and the look on your face makes me think you are feeling frustrated.” This step can be especially helpful for younger children, as it offers language that supports their ability to understand and express themselves. It can also help an older child to start talking about what it is that is bothering him. For example, “You seem sad right now” can open the conversation more easily than “How are you?” It is important not to assume you know how a child feels but to use language that shows your empathic process. “You look upset. I saw you fall. It can be scary to fall so suddenly.” Invite the child to tell her story or to show you how it happened: “Can you tell me what happened?” or “You fell! Can you show me where you scraped your knee?”

Finally, ask the child what he needs. “Do you need a hug or a drink of water?” If it is an older child and the problem-solving is more involved, wait till the child is calm and collected again. Your calm presence throughout the process will communicate “I am here with you, and you are in no danger.”

When we take the time to skillfully respond to children who are upset, we help them integrate their brains, develop their emotional intelligence, and practice communication skills that will last for a lifetime. We also give them the priceless gift of being compassionately witnessed during a challenging moment. We are there to support them, even if we don’t understand what the big deal is. (If it is a big deal to them, it is a big deal to us.) That kind of compassion is contagious: Children exposed to it will have an easier time blooming into their own authentic selves and will be more likely to respond to others in need with the same presence and compassion.

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