

THE FELLOWS' FORUM

DEALING WITH THE LEMONS: THE POSITIVE EFFECTS OF TALKING ABOUT THE NEGATIVE

Most of us know the phrase, “When life hands you lemons, make lemonade.” In fact, the majority of us probably heard a parent or grandparent say some form of it throughout our childhood. It makes sense to think that, like most other things, we learned how to be optimistic and positive by interacting with optimistic and positive adults. However, after you make the lemonade, what happens to those lemons?

When I started my research, I was interested in how families talk about emotions and how it relates to preadolescent well-being. I hypothesized that if families integrated positive emotion into their family narratives about stressful, negative events, their children would show more positive effects than those children in families that fail to integrate positive emotion when discussing a negative event. In other words, if parents modeled optimism when they talked about a negative event that the family experienced together, then their children would learn how to deal with their negative experiences in a positive manner and thus have better peer relationships, better behavior, and higher self-esteem.

My research is part of a larger study directed by MARIAL faculty fellows Robyn Fivush and Marshall Duke called the Family Narratives Project, which examined familial interaction patterns in forty middle-class families. Each family had a preadolescent child (ages nine to twelve) when the study began. I was one of the researchers who went into their homes and asked the whole family to talk about a negative event they had experienced in the last year. Families usually discussed this event in their living room or around their kitchen table just as they would normally. Then, two years later, as the preadolescents were entering early adolescence, they answered several questionnaires to measure how they perceived their social competence, behavioral conduct, and self-esteem.

After collecting, coding, and analyzing the family narratives, I found something that I wasn't expecting. Those families that used

more negative emotion while discussing a shared negative event had children doing much better than those children who were in families that integrated optimism into their narratives. Specifically, those families that expressed specific negative emotions, discussed negative emotions in a collaborative manner (i.e., verified other family members' emotions), and explained negative emotions by talking about the causes and consequences, as well as ways to cope with negative emotion, had children who reported more socially competent behaviors, fewer behavioral problems, and higher self-esteem. In fact, family disagreements seemed to surround positive emotion that was initiated into family discussion. When a family member tried to “make lemonade,” other family members often resisted. Furthermore, children in these families reported more behavioral problems.



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Many of the negative events that the families discussed were about deaths of pets or deaths of grandparents. And it was statements surrounding the negative emotions felt by different members and explanations for such feelings that related to children's positive well-being. For example, a family member was talking about the death of a grandmother; right away, other family members began saying things such as, “Oh that was so sad, remember?” Other family members repeated the sentiment, adding, “Remember we were really sad because it

was right before Christmas” and “Yeah, this made it even worse because it was the first Christmas without her.”

So, what was going on? Statements acknowledging and confirming family members' feelings provide children with a context or environment in which they feel safe not only feeling and expressing negative emotions but also working through them. When a family deals with a negative event, it can be extremely frightening and unsettling for all members, especially children. The discussions around feelings, the acknowledgement of feelings, and the shared sense that “we felt these sad and scary emotions as a family” are what provide children with the understanding and competence to face their own negative experiences.

Let's face it, we all experience negative events in our lives. My research indicates that adolescents who are able to express and discuss their negative emotions with their family fare better. By having a safe context to express such feelings, children are able to go out in the world with the confidence and emotional understanding that even the hardest and most difficult emotions can be understood and resolved. In turn, they perceive themselves as socially competent, well behaved, and worthwhile individuals who have skills to deal with even the toughest experiences.

My research doesn't suggest that families shouldn't express positive emotion or optimism when discussing past negative events. Rather, it suggests that it is important for families to discuss and explain negative emotion that all families face. It is a healthy way to foster emotional understanding in children, which helps them succeed as they get older. ■

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