

I WONDER, HOW DOES YOUR MONKEY FEEL?

by Peter Ernest Haiman, Ph.D.

When you are with your child and something or someone upsets you, do you tell your youngster how you feel? If not, why not? Do you ever speak with your adolescent regarding the worries you have about a decision you need to make? If you do, great! If not, what keeps you from doing so? How can children be expected to talk with their parents about uncomfortable feelings and problems if these children do not first see their parents speak about some of their own difficulties in front of them?

Research tells us that the parent is the most important role model in a child's life. Most parents, however, fail to use this influence as effectively as they might in the area of parent-child communications. Very few parents are aware that admitting their own vulnerabilities and weaknesses to their child can be seen by the child or adolescent as a sign of the parent's strength. Most parents feel they must always appear to be strong, right, and without anxieties in front of their children and teenagers. Youth eventually see this facade for what it is: a cover-up of fears and weaknesses. More importantly, in the eyes of a teenager, it is seen as a false self and a lie. When this young person needs an emotionally strong, resilient, and genuine parent upon whom to rely, and with whom to develop and mature, the adolescent senses such a parent is not there for them. This is one reason so many teens feel lost, become depressed, and turn to peers and/or drugs.

Parents must talk with their young children, and especially with teenagers, about the truth that each person has his or her own fears, and each has weaknesses and vulnerabilities. Each person also has strengths. ***A person's awareness of and ability to talk about their concerns, worries, and fears is, in itself, a strength.*** Having these feelings is not a weakness. Every person has them. Weakness is not being able to speak openly and honestly about them.

To be able to talk about feelings, especially difficult ones, requires some practice and a trust in one's ability to do so. Unfortunately, most people have not developed trust in their ability to articulate their feelings. They had little practice with or guidance from their parents and other adults in this important area of development. Some even were told by their parents that expressing anger or other uncomfortable emotions was wrong.

Three of the most uncomfortable feelings are sadness, fear, and anger. Personal loss and failure can arouse these feelings. We are taught at a young age, for instance, to fear making mistakes. Then when we fail to live up to or achieve standards we have set for ourselves, we feel ashamed. We close ourselves off not only from those before whom we feel shame, but also from our own feelings. Even as children, we have all sorts of unconscious drives, the emotional force of which can confuse us. Yet no one helped us identify and talk about these feelings when we were young. These and many other reasons tend to keep us on guard.

Life would be so much easier—both personally and interpersonally—if we were more trusting and open emotionally, and knew how to communicate inwardly and to others about how we feel. Just because an emotion carries with it feelings of threat and foreboding from your past does not mean talking about that feeling has to be threatening, frightening, or otherwise difficult. To learn to speak about your feelings after you have not been able to do so can feel like being released from prison. It is well worth the effort, and even risk, that accompanies all constructive growth and learning. Parents who are frightened of their own feelings can undertake this for themselves. Moreover, if you want your child to grow up free to express his or her feelings, you can take an active role in teaching this vital skill. You can do this even if you are uncomfortable expressing your own feelings.

You can begin by playing a zoo game with your child. For example, you can sit down on the floor with your child, age two to six, and a collection of plastic or rubber animals. (If animal toys are not available, the same game can be played with stuffed dolls.) You can hold up a baby giraffe and a big lion, and say, “I’m scared of the big lion.” Or if you have a monkey, you can make another animal take its banana away, and have the monkey say, “I’m angry! You took my banana!”

Then you can give your child a chance to practice, as well. You can guide the child: “Can you make your monkey angry?” Or “What will make your lion sad?”

As you and your child continue to practice, you can ask, “I wonder how the little monkey felt when the mommy monkey left?” Or “I wonder how big brother elephant feels when mommy elephant pays so much attention to little sister?”

If, as a parent, you show empathy for the youngest of the animals in your play, your young child will sense your empathy for him or her. You then can ask, “I wonder if *you* ever feel that way?”

These kinds of games are helpful for addressing the uncomfortable feelings and conflicts experienced by many young children. These conflicts distress parents and other family members, as well as the young child. The vital first step for parents wishing to solve such problems is to find their cause(s). Then you can work with your child to reduce or eliminate those causes.

You as a parent can practice voicing feelings you may not have been able to speak about comfortably all your life. And at the same time, you can show your child how to verbalize feelings constructively, without acting out in ways that could hurt him or her, or others. You can continue this dialogue about feelings as your child develops into adolescence. In this way, he or she will know that it is safe to come to you, no matter what has happened. Role play scenarios such as the ones described here are the first important steps to keep your child out of the prison you may have been in most of your life—that is, until your child gave you the keys to your freedom.