THE SCIENCE OF PARENTING | MONDAYS

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Why ‘Use Your Words’ Can Be Good for Kids’ Health

Studies show that writing or expressing what we are feeling can help adults mentally and physically. Kids are no different

BY J. DAVID CRESWELL EDITED BY MEGHA SATYANARAYANA

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In a desperate parenting moment after dinner, I told my six-year-old, who was mid-meltdown, to "use your words!" He had just started yelling and hitting his eight-year-old sister because she wasn't sharing a stuffed animal he believed was his. Both kids froze for a moment, giving me just enough of a pause to slow my own quickly rising emotions.

Looking back, I realize I never actually explained to my kids why words can help. But putting feelings into words is how we begin to name what's happening inside of us, and that naming can start to change the experience itself. Sometimes, as research shows, the words we choose to describe our lives can shape our mental health for months and years to come.

As a psychologist who has spent the better part of two decades studying stress and resilience in my Health and Human Performance Laboratory at Carnegie Mellon University, I've been exploring how verbalizing our feelings can transform experience. They can help manage heated moments but also support healing from life's hardest moments. Research published over the past 40 years on expressive disclosure—literally, using your words—especially about stressful life events, shows it can lead to significant health improvements. After writing about a difficult situation, people report fewer doctor visits, reduced pain, stronger immune function, and better outcomes for conditions like asthma and arthritis.

There are some rules of thumb we've learned from these studies with adults. First, writing about a difficult life event three or four times in close succession (such as on consecutive days) tends to be more effective than spreading the

sessions out. Second, for each writing session the sweet spot seems to be at least 15 minutes; shorter sessions can even backfire, making health worse. Third, for those who don't like to write, talking through one's feelings works just as well. In fact, when one study directly compared talking and writing, talking came out ahead because we can express more in 15 minutes of speech than in writing.

One reason talk therapy can be so powerful is that it helps people put words to their experiences in a safe, structured way. In one study, psychologist Jonathan Adler followed a group of adults who wrote narratives about themselves over a period of 12 psychotherapy sessions. He found that as participants in therapy began to describe themselves with a greater sense of agency—seeing themselves as active authors of their own lives—their mental health improved. He noticed that the change in the stories came first, followed by improvements in well-being. For parents, this is a reminder that helping kids tell their own stories with a sense of choice and authorship, whether about a playground conflict or a family move, can plant seeds of resilience.

One of the surprising findings to me is that translating our feelings into words can transform the feelings themselves. For example, neuroscience studies show that the act of naming one's emotional experience ("angry") activates emotion regulation circuits in the brain's prefrontal cortex. In the scientific literature, this process is called "affect labeling," and it has powerful clinical benefits. In one study, participants with a spider phobia who labeled their feelings during exposure therapy—while sitting next to a tarantula—had a reduced physiological stress response to spiders one week later relative to participants who used other strategies, like distraction.

While taking a hot emotion and putting it into words has the potential to blunt its immediate force, expressive disclosure can also reshape our emotional

memories. When we narrate difficult experiences, whether in writing or speech, we aren't simply recalling a memory. We are pulling it back up from long-term memory, reshaping it with our words, and then putting it back into long-term storage as a new altered memory. This process, known as memory reconsolidation, gives us a window of time to change how that memory is structured. By describing painful or overwhelming events, we don't just relive them. We reorganize them. We add meaning, emotional context, and resolution. In doing so, we can reduce the distress these memories trigger and make them easier to live with.

When I was a graduate student, I saw how powerful words could be. I spent one year reading and coding expressive essays from women who had survived breast cancer. What surprised me was how often they talked about their sense of purpose, their close relationships and their personal values. These women were examining their emotional lives, reconsolidating their memories and experiences and reaffirming what they most cared about.

Similar expressive writing programs are being explored with children and stem from work by psychologist John Gottman, who introduced a parenting approach called emotion coaching two decades ago. A recent research review shows these newer expressive writing programs have small but meaningful effects on improving emotional well-being outcomes among kids ages 10 to 18 years old. There's even some indication that these programs can improve school achievement among kids who have significant emotional problems. Even for young kids, storytelling and drawing can help make sense of big emotions, especially when guided by a teacher or parent.

Of course, not every child is ready or able to use their words in the same way. Children with early speech delays or kids who are neurodivergent may find

verbal expression especially difficult in emotionally charged moments. For these children, emotion coaching might include pictures, physical prompts, or co-regulation through calm presence. My lab has been developing a new mindfulness meditation training app that can help parents develop these calm presence skills, with some of our initial clinical trial research showing that learning these calm presence skills reduces stress biology and improves social connectivity. These skills develop gradually. The key is flexibility, patience, and meeting your child where they are.

"Use your words" is a tool, and like any tool it takes practice to use well. If you've tried saying it in the middle of a tantrum, you know that doesn't work all that well. Big emotions often shut down a child's ability to think clearly, let alone speak. In our family, we've learned that the most important work often happens outside those intense moments. My wife and I try to talk with our kids when they're calm, helping them reflect on what strong emotions they might have had earlier that day and how they want to respond the next time they feel angry or overwhelmed. These conversations build emotional vocabulary and give our kids a sense of choice about how to act.

What else can parents do? Try a bedtime or breakfast check-in with your child: "What was the hardest part of your day (yesterday)?" Gently explore it with them: "What were you feeling when that happened?" Parents can also model emotion language by saying something like, "I'm feeling frustrated right now, so I'm going to take a breath." These small moments can build a child's emotional vocabulary and can help foster a new family approach to how we relate to our emotional lives. These techniques can work especially well when integrated into a daily rhythm, so the practice of naming feelings becomes a natural part of family life.

And sometimes, we see it pay off. Our eight-year-old daughter now announces, “I’m so mad!” when she’s frustrated—naming the feeling instead of acting on it. My six-year-old is trying new ways to ask his sister to share her toys, and sometimes it even works. When their words help them get what they want or help solve a problem, it creates its own reward loop. Over time, these small moments of language aren’t just about resolving conflicts; they help our kids start to see themselves as capable actors in their own stories, which, as research shows, is a foundation for lasting well-being.

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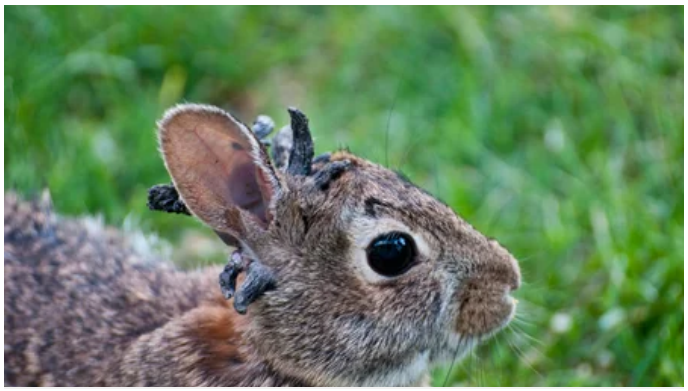

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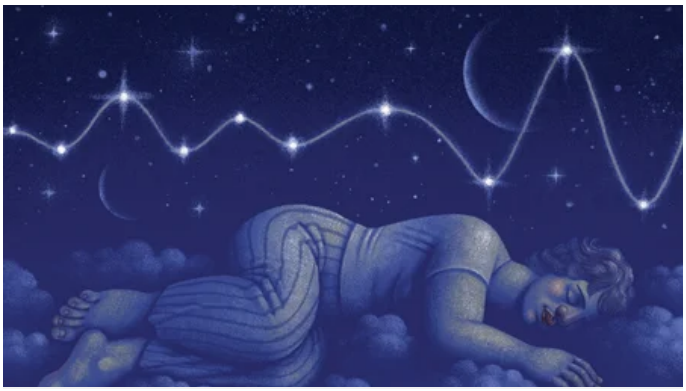

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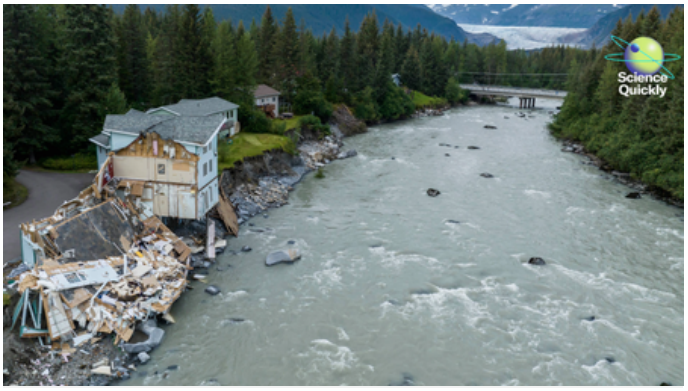

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