

# Too Much Sharing of Feelings With Kids?

By LISA BELKIN

Illustration by Barry Falls

We want our children to share their feelings, right? RIGHT?

In a guest post today, the psychologist Richard Weissbourd, currently a lecturer at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and the author of the seminal book [“The Parents We Mean to Be: How Well-Intentioned Adults Undermine Children’s Moral and Emotional Development,”](#) suggests that sometimes all that sharing is more about the parent’s feelings than the child’s. And it might just be doing more harm than good.



## **THE PARENT AS THERAPIST** By Dr. Richard Weissbourd

My wife and I believe strongly that it’s important for our kids to understand and express their feelings. But sometimes when we try to get our kids to explore why they’re sad, frustrated or angry, we cross a bright line, and our kids let us know it: “Stop trying to be my therapist.”

We are parents of the psychotherapeutic age. We are the generation that talks more about our feelings — and our children’s feelings — than perhaps any generation of parents in the history of humankind. We know that keeping emotions bottled up can be unhealthy, and learning how to navigate and talk about them can be a key to gratifying relationships.

But there’s a high paradox at work here. We care deeply about kids’ emotional well-being yet we can undermine that well-being through aggressive attempts to secure it. We believe passionately in the importance of being close to our children but often push our children away by taking the role of therapists.

Think about this from a child’s perspective. Most of us can remember

getting angry at someone at work and having that person analyze our feelings rather than addressing the problem that caused them. We feel patronized and insulted to be treated that way by another adult. Kids can feel the same way. They don't want to talk about why they're angry that they had to leave the playground or the pool. They want to convince us that it was unfair of us to tear them away from the fun.

Sometimes we simply need to back off and let our kids' feelings unspool. When we press kids to name or talk about their emotions, we can deprive them of both the richness of their feelings and of their ability to work them through on their own. For a child of any age to manage difficult emotions, often they need to experience these feelings deeply and on their own terms. Before our kids can forgive us for yanking them from the playground, they may need to savor how stupid we are and rail against the injustice of the world.

But there's an important issue that overhangs all this. What is our motivation for talking with our kids about their feelings? Are we sometimes doing it because it benefits us and not because it benefits them?

I know that sometimes I want to talk about why my kids are angry at me because I can't tolerate their anger. Other parents might see getting kids to talk about their feelings as a way of building the intimacy they crave with their children. Still others might be compensating for their own childhoods with parents who never talked to them about their feelings.

But we can't be effective in drawing out our kids' feelings unless we disentangle our needs from theirs. Kids sniff out when it's about us and not a real invitation to understand their concerns. How and when we talk about our children's feelings depends on their gender, their temperament and their stages of development, among other factors, yet we also can't be tuned in to these variations if we're caught up in our own feelings.

Some of the trouble concerns the "how" rather than the "what" of our attempts to get children to open up about their feelings. We may want our kids to meet our gaze and confess everything that's on their minds, but eye contact can be a burden for many kids when we're trying to discuss something sensitive. For most teenage boys, for

example, a face to face talk with a parent about their inner feelings is about as appealing as hearing about their parents' sex lives.

Sometimes it helps not to be quite so pointed about it. Some of my best efforts with my own kids happened while we were watching TV or driving in the car. These situations lessened the intensity for them and I was more able to give guidance — not as a therapist, but as a living, breathing, imperfect parent.