

## Parenting the Behaviorally Negative and Emotionally Intense Child

I have been counseling individuals, couples, and families for many years. Whenever I meet a new client, I begin by taking a history to get a sense of who they are and where they're coming from. When I do this, I find things that are both unique and things that are universal. One of those universal things I always find is that there is some level of emotional intensity that is at the core of the issue that brought them to my office.

Take Josephine\*, for example. When I met Josephine in 2008, she was having a terrible time with her two daughters' behavior. It felt so overwhelming to her that she was contemplating suicide and was afraid that she might hurt her children if she did not get control of her emotions immediately. During our first meeting she was anxious, afraid, uncomfortable, and tearful - but most of all, hopeless. She was happily married, had two beautiful children, and things were looking up for them with her husband's acceptance to medical school. "So," she asked me, "why am I in this downward spiral? What's wrong with me? Why can't I be happy with what I have?" My heart went out to her.

Like Josephine, all of us experience depression, anxiety, and other unpleasant and intense emotions from time to time. These feelings are a part of human nature and thus are a fact of life. While we may not feel these emotions as intensely or as often as others, nonetheless virtually everyone can relate to feeling depressed, hopeless and alone, and can have at least some compassion for Josephine's experience. In one way or another, we've all "been there."

This is why I often consider it so ironic to find otherwise loving, committed, wonderful parents having such difficulty understanding their intense child's emotional needs. So many parents of emotionally intense children end up - almost literally - throwing out the baby with the bath water. By the time they end up in my office they're bitter, frustrated, and have decided their child is essentially broken.

Consider the following statements that I have heard made by parents - in the presence of their children - and try to imagine hearing such things as a child:

"I think it's all his fault. He refuses to control himself. Nobody is holding a gun to his head and yet he acts as if it is all our fault when he gets in trouble."

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“All I can do is say a prayer and hope God will reach him, because I’ve given up trying to. It’s like he doesn’t care about anything but himself.”

“We love him, but we don’t like him anymore. I know that might sound bad, but really, what’s to like?”

“None of our other kids are like this, so it certainly isn’t our fault. She’s been given everything, so it’s not like she has any excuses.”

While it is tempting to assume that these statements must be coming from horrible parents, the truth is these statements were made by some of my otherwise most well-adjusted parents. Besides their toxic attitude towards their intense child, they were basically successful, balanced, happy individuals. They just had gotten to the point where they did not know what else to do. Frustration led to a lack of compassion and a lack of desire to help. They were seeing their child as the problem, not that their child had a problem.

Now, don’t get me wrong. I know that parenting is tough work, and I have nothing but empathy and compassion for parents of emotionally intense children. But when we fail to give our needy children the nurturing they need, we are throwing in the towel and allowing the negativity and tension to build up like a toxin in our child’s emotional system and we end up only making matters worse. In these circumstances children don’t just learn to live with negativity; they actually learn how to feed on it. Once that happens, and they believe the only way to fill their emotional tank is to upset, annoy, irritate, and otherwise infuriate their parents, then the real “fun” begins.

This is the point at which I usually find myself getting involved. In my office arrives a parent spent, out of energy, out of patience, and almost out of love. And with them is a child who is unconsciously convinced that their choices are to either upset others or be ignored, to metaphorically ingest poison or to go hungry. It usually looks quite hopeless...to the untrained eye.

Over the years I have found that in these circumstances, my job isn’t about trying to make parents feel guilty and forcing them to toughen up and “take one for the team” for their child’s own good; it’s about helping parents see that they have put the cart before the horse. They began with an effort to change their child’s negative behavior, before they made an effort to change their child’s negative self-image. In addition, they have confused intensity for disfunction; they were scared of their child’s emotional intensity and tried to get rid of it. The simple fact is if we try to suppress or minimize the energy of a challenging child, we do

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not get less energy and behavior, we simply get negative energy and behavior. But we can direct that energy away from negativity and towards positivity. And the change begins with us as parents.

I know that most people at this point are thinking “easier said than done.” I know. And I agree. But as powerless as we may feel in the beginning, the truth is that the power is ours to redirect our energy from the negative to the positive so our children can follow in our footsteps. It may seem daunting, but it really isn’t any more difficult than the situation most parents have already found themselves in, trying to manage an emotionally intense child who is convinced their worth is equal to how bad they are being at any given time. And as difficult as it may be, the choice is between doing what has always been done and remaining on “auto pilot”, or making some changes and sacrificing the comfort of our old habits. It’s a short-term sacrifice of time and energy, but the long term rewards are well worth it. If you have the vision, you can make it happen.

To begin this process, we must first connect with a child’s understanding of what is going on. They do not think like adults do. I know this is obvious, but it’s shockingly easy to forget in the heat of the moment. And in the heat of the moment, we can begin to think that if we make the consequences of their behavior negative enough they’ll “get it” and stop the behavior. This works for some kids, but not the intense and needy ones. Intense kids take a close look at punishment and soon figure out that the way to get your engine revved up is to “push buttons.” This creates a cycle of negative energy being released by us, followed by a release of negative energy by the child...and pretty soon parent and child are locked in a dance of negativity. **But with this dance, the child leads.**

Once you see that your child is seeking more of your energy, not less of your punishment, you are ready to move on to shifting your focus to the positive behavior. This is hard, but we must retrain the child from believing that negative behavior is the way to get your energy into believing that connecting with you through positive behavior is the way to get your energy. This is a challenging period because the child will test you, but it is also a fun and rewarding one as you see your child changing from predominantly negative behaviors to predominantly positive ones. By focusing on the positive, we help them learn to see themselves in a new light, a more positive light. And this new-found self-esteem - not some nifty, last-and-greatest discipline “trick” - is where positive behavior will come from. But we must teach them how to see their own greatness. The key is to not just “catch them doing good” but to literally create success and greatness for them out of thin air. **Don’t just wait for your child to do**

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**something great. See greatness where you didn't before and point out to your child what you see.** An easy way to do this is to start making a “big deal” out of what you would normally think of as something relatively small and insignificant. We usually ignore the vast majority of our child’s positive behaviors because we call them “normal.” We are waiting for the **really** good or **really** bad stuff to punish or praise, but the so-called mundane behavior gets no response at all. But these “normal” moments are where greatness is hiding. It is in the child who chooses to complete a meal at the table without making a huge mess just for fun, in the child who chooses to watch a television show in silence - even for just a few minutes - without disturbing everyone else, in the child who points out something beautiful (to them) like a bug or a car or a truck. And the list goes on. The point is simply that if we wait around for them to spontaneously feel better and then behave better, we are spinning our wheels. We have to help them see the greatness that is in them so they can learn to feel it and unlock it. But we have to see it first. And this is hard because it forces us to admit that we too have been missing their greatness all along. **We have been ignoring their greatness as a person while trying to coax them into good behavior.** But once we have seen their greatness and shifted our energy towards it, then it is simply a matter of time.

Most people who hear this sort of explanation respond with something like “That sounds too easy.” I have always responded with something like “Simple? Yes. Easy? No.” The fact of the matter is that an intense child will allow you to make parenting intense. There is no way out of your child needing your energy. I have found that there are just some children who will get your energy; the choice is whether it will be on their terms or yours. Helping an emotionally intense child learn to harness their inner greatness is a difficult process. But I have found that given the right amount of time, and if the parents seek out the positive in the right way, virtually every child can unlock their greatness.

By the way: Josephine learned how to make this transformation for her children and herself. The suicidal feelings went away, depression turned into peace, and she was able to see her needs and respect them. Gone was the judgement for what she wasn't. She learned to love herself for her greatness and was able to then see it in others, starting with her children. They had a new mom, and she had new daughters. It wasn't easy, but it was real and Josephine will never be the same. Or more accurately, she will never look at things the same way ever again. Her outlook and her relationships were transformed forever.

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