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Episode 1: Helping Navigate Emotions

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Patty O'Connor 0:02

Patty, welcome to little feet community podcast where the wonders of childhood take center stage. I'm Patty O'Connor, a retired preschool teacher, and your host in New York's Hudson Valley. In each episode, we will chat with professionals, parents and community members to get to the heart of what it really takes to help those early years feel magical for both you and your child. In today's episode, we'll be chatting with licensed clinical social worker and play therapist Rebecca Lewis, on the topic of emotional intelligence. Rebecca will be offering ideas for how to support your child's emotional growth and offering tips for what to do when emotions get high. And then later in the episode, we'll answer a question posed by one of our followers on our social media accounts. So you're in a supermarket when your two year old has a meltdown and all eyes are on you and your kid, what do you do? This is every parent's nightmare. If it's happened to you, you know that it's near impossible to block out that feeling you get from the eyes of strangers, how adults respond to difficult situations like this, as well as the easy ones, sets the child on a lifetime of understanding of their own emotional systems and their understanding of social interactions. So what's a parent to do to help us with this, I'd like to welcome our guest, licensed clinical social worker and play therapist, Rebecca Lewis, welcome Rebecca, thank you.

Rebecca, can you explain for us what play therapy is and what the goals are of the therapeutic technique? Absolutely, play therapy is an evidence based treatment used with children, where play is really the metaphor, and play and toys allow the child to have some distance from whatever is going on in their inner worlds. And it's really about meeting the child where they are developmentally. And you know, young children lack abstract thought. They're not miniature adults. They don't process their emotions the way that we do. So it's, it's about meeting them where they are. Well, that's, that's a beautiful gift that you can give to a child, to, you know, find a way to meet them where they are. So I really appreciate the work that you do. Thank you.

So Rebecca, one thing that's recommended as you prepare for situations like our supermarket example is that you try to always be aware of that stage and of emotional and physical development that your child is in, and you think about that as you prepare for what your reactions will be to their needs. So why? Why is it so important to consider this when preparing to respond to your child?

Rebecca Lewis 2:50

I think it's easy parents and caregivers sometimes have higher expectations of our kids than we do of ourselves. You know, sometimes we forget that their brain is still developing. It's not going to be fully developed until they're in their 20s. And so, you know, certain kids also have sensory sensitivities, and different situations like being in a loud and crowded supermarket might be really triggering. So

remembering that every child is different. They all have their own unique needs, just like we do as adults.

Patty O'Connor 3:29

So what should a parent do in a situation like our supermarket? Now, in this example, the child was two years old, so you take that into consideration, of course, what should they do?

Rebecca Lewis 3:39

Okay, well, I think the very first step is to first try and regulate yourself as the parent or as the adult in that situation, because if we are not regulated, we can't expect the child to regulate their own emotions. So the way to co regulate with your child is by trying to relax that fight or flight system which might have been kicked into high gear when you were in the middle of a crowded supermarket and your child is flailing around on the floor and everyone's staring at you, so noticing how your body feels in that moment, is your heart beating really fast? Is your face getting red? Are you starting to tense up and focusing on grounding first and foremost? So that can be done by taking a really, really deep breath and lengthening the exhalation. And that's going to trigger our parasympathetic nervous system to then kick into gear and let our bodies and brains know that we can chill out. This isn't a dangerous situation. It's just a two year old having a hard time. And then once we do that, then we're in a better place to respond to our child. Child, then we can focus on validating their feelings. So then I might say to the child, wow, you were really upset. You were you're really having a hard time, or you're stomping your feet or whatever you're observing in that moment and also being aware of your tone of voice when you're saying

Patty O'Connor 5:20

that absolutely, absolutely. In fact, that's exactly what I was thinking as you were saying, that is, your tone was validating, and you were you were communicating that you saw the child, saw their feelings, but you yourself had a very calm tone, which I'd definitely like to talk more about later, but for a moment, if you don't mind, let's I'm just going to quickly go through you had touched on sensory response, so I'm just going to go quickly through just a little explanation of that. So it is really helpful to think about sensory development hand in hand with emotional development, because in the first two years of life, children explore the world through their five senses, but really through their seven senses. Because you have to think about how balance and body awareness plays into that as well. It's a vital time as their physical responses to stimulation create emotional responses and how they navigate and build experience with these responses lays the foundation for how they will navigate emotional response later. So here's an example. So if a child, maybe an 18 month old child, touches shaving cream and dislikes the feeling, what are they going to do?

They're going to pull back from it. If the adult responds by saying, Oh, you don't like shaving cream, the child is unlikely to then want to ever try it again, right? So it's really in contrast, it's better for the adult to say, I see that you don't like how that feels. That's okay. It's a new feeling. And then if the adult encourages the child to just stay and watch while the adult explores the shaving cream, the child was much more likely to learn that not everyone likes the same things and that trying new things is good, right? So how does this tie into emotional development? Emotional responses are deeply entwined with the physical responses and you really need to, as I said, look at the two, for example. And Rebecca, you had alluded to this, like, let's just say that a child has a sensitivity to touch, and they feel very irritated by the tags on their clothing, or where the seam hits their toes and their socks, right? And while not noticed by others around them, they could be inwardly struggling with that, with the frustration of those things. And then all of a sudden, whoa, someone comes and like grabs a toy out of their hand and their reaction to that may seem disproportionate to the situation, but that's because that frustration was already there simmering on below the surface. So by understanding their what's going on for them from a sensory standpoint, it can give us a lot of insight into what can be going on for them, then emotionally, and by helping your child understand that too, by helping them understand that their physical being and how it responds to the world, you're helping them build knowledge that will better enable them to tap into those physical responses during emotional challenges, just like Rebecca you were referring to, that we need to have that knowledge of how we're physically responding to those emotional situations. Rebecca, do you see a lot of sensory dysregulation tied to emotional dysregulation in your work as a therapist?

Rebecca Lewis 8:54

Absolutely. I see it in my work. I see it in my home. I see it at the park. I see it everywhere, you know. And often times, what parents view as tantrums with their children are really sense of sensory overload. And then sometimes there is one more trigger, and that is just the straw that breaks the camel's back, and they cannot take it anymore for even one more second,

Patty O'Connor 9:25

absolutely. And I mean, we've all been there, I mean, as adults, as well as kids. And now we are going to pause for a message from our sponsor, the Covet Collective is a woman's boutique where you can shop your values with their collection of fashion and goods made by purpose driven businesses who prioritize sustainability, ethical production and believe in giving back to make a positive impact on the world. They have a beautiful shop in the village of Rhinebeck, New York, but. They also are for the option of online shopping. You can shop based upon categories like Made in America and black owned business. They are located at 19 East Market Street, Suite two in Rhinebeck, New York. You can also check out their website, the Covetcollective.com

and we are back to little feet community with our guest, Rebecca Lewis, I'd like to touch on a technique that we use a lot as teachers, but and I'm sure you're familiar with it, I heard you using it a bit in the example you gave earlier, but the form of communication called active and reflective listening. So I'm just going to review that a moment and give an example for the parents, and then we can talk about it some more. Okay, so let's just say, here's an example. You're at the playground, and your child runs up to you crying. You get down on their level. Try not to pick them up, because by keeping their feet on the ground, it communicates non verbally that you believe they're strong and capable, so you get down on their level and maintaining eye contact, you listen to what they have to say. Now, while I relate this example, I'd like you to just note the pitch and tone of my voice, because I'm going to play both the child and the adult here. So so so the adults voice is best kept medium pitched and calm, yet communicating interest and concern. But try. You know, it's hard when a child comes up to you using that upset high pitch. Don't match it. Don't match that dysregulated voice. So, so here we go. So again, you're at the playground, and your child runs up to you, and they say, I was on the swing, and I got off to get my hat, and when I came back, Jimmy was on the swing. An engaged, healthy response would be, Jimmy was on the swing. When you came back, I can see that that felt hard for you. Now, it's best to give, to allow the grace of time, because by being quiet now, oftentimes the child will follow up, they'll have more to share, so your role is to assist as they come to a conclusion on how to process the feeling and move forward. So perhaps it might sound a little like this, yeah, and I wasn't even done, and Jimmy is always taking my stuff. I hear that playing with Jimmy can be frustrating. Sometimes I wonder why Jimmy got on the swing. He always wants what I have. Sounds like Jimmy may have a hard time sharing. Sometimes, I know I have a hard time sharing. Sometimes, yeah, he never shares. Well. Friends can help each other work on that. What do you think you could say to Jimmy to let him know you weren't finished with your turn? Now, during the course of this type of conversation, your child naturally settles their emotions works to become more grounded, because settling them is necessary for communicating with you. Rebecca, what do you recommend for those times when a child is too upset for this type of a conversation?

Rebecca Lewis 13:13

Well, I think allowing them to have the space and time to work through is important. They think as adults, we get really uncomfortable watching our kids struggle, and sometimes want to rush them through that process, but over time, they will return to baseline. And I would go back to that CO regulation example that we spoke about earlier, where we can focus on regulating our own emotion, and the child will observe that see how we're regulating, and even if they're not ready to take a deep breath, we can speak out loud and say, I'm feeling a little stressed right now. I'm going to take a deep breath absolutely

Patty O'Connor 13:59

and what I love about your example is the modeling that you're talking about. You know that we're modeling self help that also kind of spoke to the ability for a child to self soothe. And so this makes me think about how important that ability is. I mean, it's a skill. How can we help teach our children that skill?

Rebecca Lewis 14:22

Well, in addition to regulating ourselves and that CO regulation piece, I think, getting to know your child's interests, what calms them down, and even developing a coping tool kit that they can take along with them in the car if they need or if it's something that they can do internally, just some different skills that you can work work on with your child, such as deep breathing. You know, you can work on that by blowing bubbles with kids. When you lengthen your exhalation, you're you can blow the bubble, you know, using fidgets. Sure. I'm using one right now. Adults, really it depends on your child's needs. Some kids can regulate by drinking through a straw that can help slow their breathing down too. For other more active kids, maybe it's wall push ups, maybe it's doing a bunch of jumps on a trampoline, racing, racing up the stairs,

Patty O'Connor 15:29

right? Absolutely, yeah. And of course, you know, as you're helping your child build this toolbox, as you say, you know it's important that we ourselves are modeling that calm ability to converse about it and have a really healthy approach to all of it.

Rebecca Lewis 15:50

Can I add one thing? Patty, Oh, absolutely. It's really important for us as the adults to give our kids the message that there are no bad emotions. We can handle their intense emotions. We don't need to rush them along. We're not scared of that. We're here for them in those moments. There's no shame, and that, in and of itself, is a really helpful tool for kids,

Patty O'Connor 16:17

and I would even call it a gift. Rebecca, what would you say a parent's role is as they help to their child gain healthy emotional intelligence. You had already touched on modeling, which is so important, but if you can go into that a little bit more, that would be

Rebecca Lewis 16:34

great. Yes, so modeling, I think, for me, is the number one thing a parent can focus on, but also helping children identify and label their emotions, because then they'll be able to recognize how they're feeling, how other people are feeling. And that can be done through play, through games, through books. You can pick up a mirror and

make different faces and label those emotions. Or when you recognize that someone is feeling a particular emotion in the park or in a storybook, you can help your child recognize some of those signs and then label the emotion.

Patty O'Connor 17:19

Yeah. And what I love about what you just shared is that it shows that it should really be built into your daily lives. So don't just save those conversations about emotions for those episodes when emotions are being felt deeply or in a difficult way, and actually behind me, I have just a tool in addition to books. But, you know, Rebecca, you probably recognize, you know, just these kind of sometimes having something like a feelings poster in your home, you know, or maybe one of those, what's it called a feelings, an emotion scale, you know, where you can teach your child to kind of identify, you know, where are you? Are you at a one right now, but just starting to help them see the pathways. You know, not only label and identify emotions, but how, how one emotion can lead to another. And you know, either through visual things such as the poster you know and or conversation and storybooks?

Rebecca Lewis 18:22

Yes, absolutely, those visual aids are so helpful for children. And I also think it's important to note that when a child is in a dysregulated state, it's important not to try and rationalize with them in that moment, because they are unable to access those higher levels of their brain. You know, when their fight or flight mode is kicked into high gear, they cannot access their prefrontal cortex. So they're not going to be able to make the right decisions or or the best decisions. They're going to have trouble with perspective taking. So our goal is really to help them return to baseline first, absolutely

Patty O'Connor 19:02

So Rebecca, of course, in the classroom, we were constantly seeing how children learn best by watching and listening and by trying out behaviors that they've observed through their play. Right and healthy growth for a child requires that they feel independent enough to explore things that they've seen and heard through their play, as they gather information about their world and work to build it into their understanding of how things work, this creative outlet of play affords them that practice. So can you take a moment and just speak to the importance of this step? Imagine if play for a child's development. Yes,

Rebecca Lewis 19:44

I think it's huge. I mean, play is their language. That is how they process their world. That's how they build mastery over their experiences. It is so a. Essential. There is so much value in play. It's really the job of childhood. Exactly that is their role is to play imaginative. Play is so incredibly important.

Patty O'Connor 20:13

Yeah, I couldn't agree more. And just developmentally, you know, as a child plays imaginatively, there's an array of developmental components that be are being brought into and practiced. So for example, let's just take an example of plain ice cream shop. I mean, you know, Rebecca, I love playing ice cream shop. So you know you're playing ice cream shop with a child, and you know, they're getting motor work that you can talk about going and picking blueberries, you know, pretend to go and pick blueberries. There you're tapping into, maybe memories they had, some recall of things that they did as a family. And then you're working on social language with them, as they, you know, are serving their customers, right? You can even work in a little math, a little counting and sorting in there, you know, and it's all through play. And you know, I've met a number of parents and even teachers, actually, who feel a lot less comfortable with that type of play than with concrete play. So for example, playing with magnet tiles. So what do you suggest? You know? What other suggestions do you have? Rebecca for adults who hear how important that play is, but are really stymied by it?

Rebecca Lewis 21:30

Yes, and I hear this a lot in my work too, that this type of play can be really difficult for parents, especially if they were brought up in homes where that wasn't really a value. So some of what I do in my practice is helping parents let their child lead. So just getting down on their level and letting them lead the play and seeing what happens. And it's really tricky, because as adults, we sit down and we're playing the game with our kids, but then we might have our own ideas of how the play should go, and allowing children to lead the play and giving them that experience so important. It's so wonderful for connection. Can really help improve behaviors too. But there is so much value in that imaginative play, so much learning is happening.

Patty O'Connor 22:33

And I guess my mind jumped, and if you don't mind, let's take let's take a moment and talk about this other aspect as well, where you can use play scenarios to help address things that either you have seen your child struggle with or you suspect they may encounter at, you know, maybe at school programs or what have you so, for example, Some sometimes, especially if you live in a home with one child, the child isn't often challenged in their play with adults, right? Because an adult already knows how to share. They already know how to take turns. So sometimes the parent has to actually kind of put on that hat of a peer, you know, and make sure that they're working on those things with the child through their play. Would you agree with that? Absolutely,

Rebecca Lewis 23:26

and that can be done through the play with toys, you know, using animals, having the animals experience different emotions, because then it provides a safe distance from what the child might be going through, then it's not about them, it's about the metaphor. But there's a lot of learning happening in those moments.

Patty O'Connor 23:49

Absolutely, and it's fun. It's fun. Okay, so now, Rebecca, what about? What if, when all those tools, you know, all the things we've talked about, if they just, you know, if the moment just continues to escalate, you had mentioned the looking at your own dysregulation, remembering to breathe, right? Is there anything else that you feel we can add to that for when it really gets like through the ceiling. Yes,

Rebecca Lewis 24:21

I think taking note of what your child has eaten that day, how their sleep was the night before, is there anything that they need in that moment? Maybe it's a snack, maybe it's a hug. Maybe, if they're rolling around on the ground and it looks like it might become an unsafe situation that might involve picking them up.

Patty O'Connor 24:45

Yeah, absolutely, you know, Rebecca, there are so many moments that a snuggle and a hug, you know, are exactly what a child needs, alright? So now this is. Really important. Rebecca, what about when calm returns like so after the episode? Should you always revisit it? You know, should you talk about it with your child afterwards? Or sometimes, maybe not. I'd love to hear what you have to say about that.

Rebecca Lewis 25:17

I think it really depends on the child. It depends if this is something that has happened multiple times that day. If it has, then probably best not to revisit, because chances are, the child is probably already feeling badly about what has occurred, and sometimes revisiting it might be upsetting, but I think it is important in a lot of cases to revisit it, talk about what happened, how the emotions got high, what can be done next time to make things go a little bit more smoothly. And ask your child if they have any ideas. You Yeah, they're they're really your partner.

Patty O'Connor 26:03

I love that. Yeah, absolutely, they're, yeah, absolutely. All of the examples and scenarios that we've shared in this episode depict pretty common moments children tend to experience, but but not all children develop their emotional skills in the same way. And if your child is becoming deeply overcome by their emotions daily, it may be a helpful idea to have your child professionally evaluated, because sometimes there are sensory, dietary, impulsivity factors that are making the journey more difficult for your child. And if this is the case. By working with a therapist, you and

your child can learn strategies that may work uniquely for them. You could work with someone like Rebecca. So let's, let's say, you know, you have as a parent, and I'm, you know, speaking, I'm a parent. Rebecca, you're a parent. You're not always going to feel good about how those episodes went

right

Rebecca Lewis 27:08

Absolutely.

Patty O'Connor 27:10

But regardless, regardless if you feel good about it or not, there's a benefit to re-examining it and kind of pulling from it, you know, the little nuggets that you can take and kind of think it through, and how you know, what would you do differently next time, right? And then also having the ability to kind of look back and say, you know, maybe I should talk this over with my child, because maybe, maybe I should say I'm sorry for how I reacted, right? What do you think about I

Rebecca Lewis 27:44

I was going to mention that next That's huge. That's really huge. And I think there are so many parents today who weren't apologized to when they were children, and it is so incredibly important to be able to apologize to your child, show them that you're human and that you make mistakes too, and that you love them no matter what, and that you're always working to repair the situation and try harder.

Patty O'Connor 28:15

Absolutely, absolutely. Okay. Now, Rebecca, it's time for a question from a follower. Our question today came to us through our Instagram account, little feet community. Emotional regulation is something I struggle with in adulthood, when I'm faced with situations that trigger me, I'm afraid to pass this dysregulation down, or worse, become a trigger for the little ones I care for how do you encourage appropriate emotional response while in a triggered state?

Rebecca Lewis 28:48

So I think the first step is self care, taking care of yourself first. Because if you, if you aren't able to give yourself that space and time to take care of yourself. It's going to be really hard to take care of your children, especially when they're having difficult moments. So I think in those moments when someone is feeling really triggered and they know the signs of their body becoming dysregulated, having some tools on hand that work for them, which looks different. You know, person to person might. It might mean carrying some life savers, candies or mints in their pockets or in their cars, listening to music in the car, if kids screaming in the back of the car is a trigger,

the breath is something that goes with you all day long. And sometimes parents need to leave the situation for a moment too. So if there is a partner at home and having your partner step in so that you can go into the bathroom, splash some water on your face, take some deep breaths. Mm, hmm. And if no one else is home at that time, or if you're a single parent, maybe even just turning around, taking a really deep breath in and out, and then turning back around to help your child. Yeah,

Patty O'Connor 30:14

excellent. Yeah. A friend recently told me that they they also like to sniff their child's head at that moment. But I have to put on the perfect the educator hat for a minute and just say, because this podcast is meant for parents as well as educators. You know, if you are working in the field of early childhood, either as a teacher or caregiver, and you're aware that you have these emotional triggers that you carry from past experiences. It's really important that you you have ideas for how to handle that. If you are in that position where this is your profession, you need to make sure that you're having healthy responses with children, right? You should not be working with children if you feel that you aren't capable of that, so I'll take that. All right. Well, thank you, Rebecca, this has been so much fun.

Rebecca Lewis 31:14

I always love chatting with you. Pat,

Patty O'Connor 31:18

all right, so let's just, I'm going to review, just go through some of the things that the some of the great advice and tips that we've reviewed. Okay, so always be aware of what stage of emotional and physical development your child is in, and try to respond based on the information you have for that stage. Be an engaged and active listener using I see and I wonder statements and empowering your child by signaling to them that they are capable emotionally be consistent in your expectations and reactions so your child knows what to expect during emotionally dysregulated moments, practice calming tone and voice levels so your child feels supported rather than judged or shamed for what they're experiencing. Use imaginative play and children's story books to make conversations around emotions a part of everyday life in your home, for example, dysregulation, one of my favorites for that is when Sophie gets angry, by Molly, bang. Um, another one is pips Magic by Ellen stole Walsh, where it's, you know about, you know, finding your inner strengths, you know. And I'm sure, do you have any favorites you'd like to mention?

Rebecca Lewis 32:36

The ones that are popping into my head now are Ruby finds, a worry that one's a great one for child anxiety and the rabbit listened.

Patty O'Connor 32:46

Another thing that often comes up a lot is and parents don't even realize they're doing it, where they'll offer a choice, where choices do not exist. So Right? Rebecca, so So work not to put a question or the term, okay, at the end of your sentences, uh, you had mentioned before. So let's mention it again. Set a good, good example with health and self care, and reflect upon episodes afterward to gain insight into what may have been contributing factors, you know, for example, diet and what may work better next time. And then the other is just, you know, always a good suggestion explore resources available to you for support and assistance. You know, especially if you know you've tried these things and you're still struggling, you know there is a community out there that is happy to help. So anything to add to those. Rebecca,

Rebecca Lewis 33:54

I think the only thing that I would add is that parents are the true experts on their own children, and that every day is a new day, every moment is a chance to start again. Something that I do with my kids when someone is a hard moment, whether it's the kids or myself, is we talk about turning our day around, and that there's always new opportunities to try new things and to make the day go a little bit more smoothly.

Patty O'Connor 34:26

Your home is a magical place. Rebecca, well, thank you for joining us. It has been a delight.

Rebecca Lewis 34:34

Thanks for having me.

Patty O'Connor 34:35

This has been the little feet community Podcast. I'm Patty O'Connor Richard, preschool teacher and your host. A special thanks to our producer Miranda Shafer and associate producer Tara Shafer. If you've enjoyed this episode, please subscribe and rate us on your podcast platform of choice, and please check out our Instagram account for news of future episode topics and opportunities to submit questions. Questions to our guests. You can submit your question through our Instagram account at little feet community. You can also learn more about little feet community on our website, www.littlefeatcommunity.com, and at our YouTube channel, www.youtube.com, forward slash at little feet community, thanks for joining us, and don't forget to play you.