Home for A While

Reader's Note

by Lauren H. Kerstein

"Talk to yourself like you would someone you love."—Brené Brown

Home for A While is about a child in foster care who is trying to manage the emotions he feels. Many children in temporary or foster care, like Calvin, experience abandonment issues and uncertainty. Children struggle with the knowledge that the person they relied on for care and security couldn't provide it, for one reason or another. Entering the foster care system is terrifying. In addition to the loss, disappointment, and possible trauma a child might have experienced, the system has flaws. Many children end up in multiple homes, or are in the system for years. This reality adds to the feelings of abandonment and uncertainty that they already face. The adults in the child's life play a critical role in helping them identify their strengths and learn the skills needed to regulate the multitude of emotions with which they must wrestle. Learning emotion regulation is a critical skill that will help a child take charge of their feelings and thoughts rather than letting their feelings and thoughts control them.

Emotion Regulation

Although Calvin tries to manage his emotions throughout the book, his strategies don't always work. Bouncing a ball in the house, throwing and kicking breakable objects, and jumping on his bed all lead to bigger problems. Emotion regulation is part of a bigger umbrella concept called self-regulation, and it is a critical skill. Research shows a positive relationship between emotion regulation and success in school, with peers, and even in future jobs. Conversely, difficulty with emotion regulation has been associated with higher levels of childhood aggression. It is critical, then, that we help children develop the skills needed to effectively manage their emotions.

Helping Children Manage Their Emotions

The first step in helping a child regulate their emotions is to listen, validate, and be present. You can also model strategies that might not only help them, but can also help you manage stressful situations that you yourself might encounter. It is critical to listen to and reflect back the child's feelings and concerns. Children need to feel seen and heard. Minimizing or discounting the intensity of their experience is not useful. Rather, we want to recognize the impact the child's experiences have had on their thoughts and feelings.

Recognize Strengths

Maggie helps Calvin see qualities in himself that he wasn't able to see before. She turns "behaviors" into qualities that Calvin can feel proud of and see as strengths rather than weaknesses. Checking in with your child to identify strengths is a very helpful tool. Building upon strengths leads to growth. In addition, discussing strengths can help a child shift their view of themselves to one that is more positive and loving. When Calvin recognized strengths in himself, it gave him the power and courage to combat his negative thoughts and feelings. Point out all the things your child is good at, even (especially!) things they might not consider important.

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"I love how you always volunteer to help when I'm making dinner."

"You're such a good listener."

"You were so brave at _____."

Understand Feelings

Calvin experienced a lot of feelings throughout the story. Many were negative: loss, fear about a new school, grief about a family picture, and frustration about misplacing his favorite shirt. He also experienced positive feelings: comfort, pride, and love. Helping a child better understand their feelings is an important part of the process of emotion regulation. Identifying and understanding feelings may seem like a simple concept, but it isn't. Many children feel bombarded by feelings but can't specifically identify what they are and what to do about them. In addition, it is important to help children recognize positive feeling triggers so that you can increase opportunities for joy and comfort. Here are a few ways you can help children develop an understanding of their feelings in order to manage their emotions more effectively:

- Discuss the feelings you might see in the illustrations in books. You can talk about triggers, label feelings, explore intensity, and identify strategies.
- Talk about feelings and strategies as often as possible. Use examples from your own life and struggles, even simple things. "I'm frustrated because I wanted to make chili for dinner but we're out of tomatoes. Maybe I'll make bean soup instead." Encourage your child to express their own such feelings.
- Gather pictures of different feelings and create a collage together.
- Identify situations that spark positive feelings, and discuss experiences that trigger negative feelings. You might do this in the moment or in retrospect depending upon how intensely the child is experiencing the feeling.

Identify Helpful Strategies

Finally, it is important to identify coping strategies to support your child when they are dealing with intense emotions. You might create a toolbox of strategies (in a box, envelope, or "coupon" filing system), or a strategy choice board (pictures of strategies on a dry erase board or construction paper) from which you can pull during a difficult time. It is challenging to access strategies and rational thinking when one is consumed with big feelings, so visual reminders of strategies are particularly useful when children are struggling. You can also practice lots of these strategies even when children are calm. When children (and adults!) are used to using the strategies in calm times, it is easier to access them in times of stress. The following strategies helped Calvin and may support your child as well: practicing mindfulness and breath-work, bouncing a ball, engaging in a physical activity such as molding clay, and taking a walk. It is important to note that many of the strategies that helped Calvin provided sensory input. Sensory input can help children regulate their bodies neurologically, physically, and emotionally.

Calvin's story has a positive ending. He knows he will be with Maggie for a while and that she will care for him. He found comfort in recognizing his strengths, and in knowing strategies that might help him during difficult times. Effective emotion management is a lifelong process for all of us. The more we can support children in this process, the more positive their lives will be.

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