

'Inside Out' provides roadmap for navigating emotions

June 25 2015, by Ayleen Barbel Fattal



Fear, disgust, sadness, joy and anger are the feelings living in 11-year-old Riley's brain in Pixar's new movie 'Inside Out.' Credit: Florida International University

Pixar's new film *Inside Out* is putting the spotlight on children's emotions. But navigating those emotions and helping children understand them is a real-life challenge. Florida International University

psychologist Zoe Klemfuss says understanding the cause of an emotion is often more important than talking about the emotion itself.

Inside Out takes viewers on a journey inside the head of Riley, an 11-year-old girl. Her memories and emotions are dictated by a team of characters representing joy, sadness, anger, fear and disgust. The movie focuses on the importance of emotions, even the negative ones, and how parents respond to them.

"Simply encouraging [children](#) to talk about their thoughts and [feelings](#) might not be helpful, especially if children are so young that they can't effectively process or cope with those thoughts and feelings," Klemfuss said. "What seems to be more effective is helping them understand the causes of their thoughts and feelings. This might involve simply asking them what made them feel a given way, or think a given thought and then helping them generate possibilities if they get stuck."

Children learn to talk about past events just like they learn to speak or read. Every child learns differently how to remember and how to talk about what they remember and what they feel. The more children share their memories, the more they improve their narrative skills, verbal ability, social skills and actual memory. Encouraging children to discuss their memories allows them to build individual identity, make social connections as well as understand and cope with emotions. Klemfuss says there are several things parents can do to help children navigate their memories and emotions:

- **Practice by talking about shared events.** Your children learn from you. Show them how you remember and talk about events or feelings you both experienced. It can also be helpful to talk about how other participants in the event might have felt.
- **Avoid yes/no questions.** Ask open-ended questions like what, when, who, etc., follow up on what your child says, and give

feedback if it was a shared event (e.g. "Actually, daddy wasn't in the car with us.")

- **Ask about emotions and their causes.** "How did you feel when [event] happened?" Then ask "Why do you think that happened or you felt that way?"
- **Show support.** Use very simple support behaviors like smiling when appropriate, using eye contact, and maintaining open body posture.
- **Minimize negative reactions.** You want to encourage them to want to talk to you. A negative reaction may deter them from confiding in you again or sharing their feelings.
- **Brainstorm effective coping strategies with your children.** These include figuring out how to avoid a negative situation if it starts to happen again (e.g. "If this happens again, you can tell a teacher right away.") Don't be afraid to directly tell them what to do when they feel a certain way.

In her latest study, Talking About Emotions, Klemfuss is examining whether questions designed to identify underlying causes of thoughts and feelings can help reduce physical and perceived stress while encouraging children to give complete and accurate accounts of an experience. Open to parents of 8 to 12-year-olds, the research study is designed to teach parents to encourage children to talk about emotions and find ways to help them recover from [negative emotions](#).

"Emotion discussion focusing on causes, explanations, and coping strategies can potentially help children deal with individual incidents and teach young children more generally about emotions, not just about a single [emotional](#) experience," Klemfuss said.

Klemfuss is a researcher at FIU's Center for Children and Families and is director of the Child Narratives Lab. Her research focuses on how social context and individual differences influence how children talk

about past events. She also looks at how individual differences in cognitive and narrative skills affect children's abilities to report about events they have experienced.

Provided by Florida International University

Citation: 'Inside Out' provides roadmap for navigating emotions (2015, June 25) retrieved 7 May 2023 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2015-06-roadmap-emotions.html>

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