

Curiosity leads to connection

Where would we humans be without curiosity? Sitting in a cave somewhere, that's for sure. For better or worse, it is curiosity that has advanced our society to where we are today. It is such a natural emotion and this becomes obvious when I spend time with kindergarteners. Five and six year olds will outright ask the questions that adults might wonder, but keep to themselves: 'What is that in your nose?' (I have a nose ring), 'What did you look like when you were a kid,' (Braids and overalls) 'What does your breath smell like?' (Followed up by, 'Here, smell mine!'). I can see that they are only just now in the process of learning about filters and sending their curiosities into the shadows. Because they're little kids, I indulge them and answer as honestly as possible because, why not? They are learning and growing. But something happens as kids mature – while they might be encouraged to pursue intellectual curiosities, it seems to me that there is a subtle message to slow down or stop altogether questions about people's feelings or internal experiences. It's just not polite!

What happens when we start to learn that people might not want us to know everything about them? When I visited my 5 year-old niece last year, she used the words 'appropriate' and 'inappropriate' over and over again, which told me that she had gotten too curious and asked too many questions. I could hear my brother's voice, "Molly, that's not appropriate!" I also couldn't help but chuckle at the thought of all the uncomfortable situations she may have caused. They don't say "Out of the mouths of babes" for nothing! Children are so often our reality checks about who we are and how we feel about things. It can be uncomfortable and it doesn't make for polite society, but is it really inappropriate?

How many times a week do you tell other people, including children, that you are fine when you are really and truly not fine? I do this quite a bit myself, for all of the same reasons as you. Children, with their fresh perspectives and beginner's minds, are tuning into all aspects of us – body language, facial expression and felt energy. When we give them a cognitive response that does not match any of these other aspects, it is confusing! When it happens again and again from multiple sources, we just become tired and immune to the interaction. Thus, "How are you?," an open ended question supposedly motivated by curiosity, gets an auto-response of "Fine." No real information has been imparted, 'fine' is not a satiating response to one's curiosity, but this is the accepted starting point for most of our current conversations. A not-really-connected connection that we're so used to that the incongruence doesn't even bother us anymore.

When I think about how different the world would be if we were able to be more honest with each other about our feelings, it is overwhelming. Things would have to change so much, the cultural shift would be massive. As it is now, we use these pleasantries as a way to keep each other safe and it works. It saves time and helps us stay focused on the things we need to accomplish. But what it can also look like is lots of people floating around on little islands wondering what in the heck other people are thinking and feeling. What we do next is fill in the blanks and make up stories about others that may or may not have anything to do with reality. With the advent of the Internet, the ultimate curiosity machine, we can even look for information about someone to confirm or deny our theories without ever talking to them. The curiosity will always be there and when we aren't able to talk about it, it comes out sideways.

Curiosity about emotions is counter-cultural. This is important to remember when working with your child to develop a curious stance around emotions. Unfortunately it seems to me that judgment is more the cultural norm around emotions, rather than curiosity. Many of the children I talk to seem to believe that if they are not feeling happy, they are doing something wrong. Some will ask me at the end of a session if they did a 'good job' because they didn't cry or show emotion. Some struggle not to feel what they are feeling and turn to self-injury or addictive behaviors. They all feel like they are doing something wrong if they aren't feeling a certain kind of way. But feelings are like the weather – they just change all the time. They aren't out to get you; they just give you information on how you need to care for yourself. When we look at a weather forecast, we don't take it personally, we say hmmm...will I need an umbrella? A sweater? Oh, I should layer because lots of changes will be happening today. We look ahead at the ten-day, the whole month even because we are so curious and want to know how to prepare. What if we took the same approach to emotions and worried less about why they were happening and more about how to healthily cope with them as they arise. Some days are just sad days. Some days we worry. At any age, the only way out is through. To sit and feel the feeling until it passes without resistance. And just like the weather passes, no emotion has stuck around forever.

Curiosity, not judgment. In discussing curiosity with the students this month I am relying heavily on the quote; "Don't judge your insides by other people's outsides." I work with children who get tripped up by this all the time. They think that because someone looks a certain way, they ARE a certain way and then start a comparison game. That kid looks happy all the time, but I don't feel happy all the time! It's a downward spiral, but curiosity can put an end to it pretty quickly. In my groups, students have the opportunity to share about their lives and someone will usually exclaim, 'I was wondering that about you!!' or 'Hey, that happened to you? Me too!' Every time this happens something shifts and relationships deepen. Curiosity almost always leads to connection, whereas judgment lends itself to isolation. So often this is gets in the way of the empathy we are working toward.

Encourage your child to develop Empathetic curiosity. A great way to do this is any opportunity to explore what it is like to be in other people's shoes. Group situations usually lead to this kind of growth, as do books, movies, friendships, travel, and the ability to process all of these experiences with a trusted adult. Most of all, if you as a parent work to keep your own feelings in alignment with your words, your child will learn first hand not to be afraid to speak their own truth about what is happening inside. They will not be afraid of your emotions if you aren't. This will also help them to be unafraid of learning about the thoughts and emotions of others. Fear shuts down curiosity, again acting as a barrier to empathy.

Help your child get curious about their feelings. Very curious. When you remove fear and judgment about emotions, it opens up a world of possibility. I, like every other living therapist, love Pixar for giving us "Inside/Out." What a great way to talk about emotions. So often emotions can feel random and out of control, stuck in the past, or missing the part of the story that would change things and we just can't figure it all out. At any age you can start working with your child to flesh out their own internal life – I know this to be true because this is what I try to do with people at any age. Some questions you can ask to help your child get to know their emotions are:

- What is the name of the feeling?
- Where do you feel it in your body

- What color is it?
- How big is it?
- Is it solid or liquid?
- Is there a movement that represents this emotion?
- Is there a posture that you do that makes it feel worse? Is there one that makes it feel better?
- When this emotion arises, what do you believe about yourself?
- Draw, dance or write about the emotion
- Does the emotion have a name?

As you can see, there are endless ways to get curious about emotions. This is a great time for you to model curious emotional exploration, and if you have a teenager that might make fun of you just say, 'I know, I'm totally wacky. But go with it.' The more comfortable your child is with their journey through their internal experiences, the less anyone will ever be able to rock their boat. They will also deeply understand that others are having their own internal experiences.

We need every kind of curiosity. There are things that I'm not too curious about that I'm very grateful others figured out. For example, I wouldn't have thought it up, but wow do I love the Internet. I'm grateful for teachers and parents who provide so much of the action behind our students' desires to learn and know and grow. What a game changer it would be if in addition to all of this, we were able to approach one another with the true wonder and curiosity that is in our hearts.

~Jen