



ASK A SOCIAL WORKER

We have multiple children (bio and adopted). Is it normal to feel a stronger bond (and have an "easier" relationship) with the children who have been in the family longer? I feel guilty for feeling this way and would like to strengthen my bond with the child who has more struggles. Do you have any suggestions?

This is a common communication we hear from families, and we know how difficult it is to feel less connected to one child versus another. We would like you to reflect on your relationship with all your children and how each relationship is different, with its own niche positives and challenges. Just as our relationship with ANYONE we spend time with is different, so will our relationships be with our children. It is completely realistic to not enjoy one of your children in any given moment or even for chunks of time, and this does not lessen our commitment to them or the love we have for them. The love we have can feel very different as well – with one child we might feel physically connected (the child likes to snuggle and read with you) while with another child we might feel connected through activities (it is most fun to play sports with this child) – each relationship SHOULD have its own qualities and specialness. Additionally, adding behavioral concerns into the relationship can make things feel more difficult, often because you spend so much time managing behavior that you have less time for the more rewarding aspects of parenting that help to build those strong bonds. One way to navigate this as a parent is to be very intentional about the time you spend with any children with whom you feel a weaker bond. Make sure to carve out special time to spend with this child doing things that will be the least triggering of difficult behaviors so that the experience can be rewarding for both you and the child. We also recommend spending some time on your own reflecting on what all your children bring to the table. Expect this to be more difficult with the children who have more struggles – remember it is harder to see strengths when the maladaptive behaviors are so “in your face” and this is not something to feel guilty about, it is realistic and normal. Then, work on finding ways to promote each child’s strengths. This will not only benefit the child but may also change your view of who the child is and hopefully have a positive impact on your relationship.

This is a great idea! My question is... What are some good activities or ways to help a child have better emotional regulation? Any tips would be helpful. Thank you for what you do!

Helping children manage their emotions is something we teach from birth. Seeing their caregivers and others around them displaying appropriate emotional regulation skills allows them, through observational learning, to pick up on and model those behaviors. When adults are not great at emotional regulation, children learn this as well. There are two aspects of biology that complicate this however – genetics and prefrontal cortex development. Some

children are genetically predisposed to have a more difficult time managing their emotions not matter what is modeled for or taught to them. On top of that, our prefrontal cortex is still developing into our 20s which means that children have the barriers of impulsivity and inattention in the way of emotional regulation, so it is not as easy for them to act with intention when they are feeling big emotions. When we mix that up with adoption, we are adding in varying developmental experiences, possible trauma, and unknown genetics which complicate things a bunch. But there are some great things we can do to assist our children in learning these valuable skills.

First, we want to make sure we are modeling appropriate emotional regulation skills. Since we are human, we cannot expect that anyone would be able to do this well 100% of the time. It can be very powerful for a child to hear from you when you have not demonstrated the best emotional regulation and to use this as an opportunity to discuss the experience with your children. This can look like – “I wanted to talk to you about earlier today when mom yelled at you. I was feeling very big feelings of frustration when that happened, and I did not do a good job of expressing my feelings. Did you know that just like you, even parents have big feelings, and we don’t always do our best when we feel big things? I wanted you to know I am sorry for yelling and that I am going to work really hard on the choice I made to yell so I can try not to do that again.”

Second, we must give our children words to express their feelings. One of the most difficult things for children is when they are feeling something and cannot figure out what that feeling is. Feelings charts are a great tool to have on hand for your children. Another option is to assign colors to feelings – it might be helpful to connect red for instance with mad, green with worried, and blue with sad. If our child is having trouble finding the feelings words, he could say he is feeling “really really red” instead and it would give us an indication about what is going on. Along with teaching feelings words, we want to make sure children understand how to connect those feelings with the physical body sensations we have such as sweaty hands, a racing heart, or butterflies in our stomach. If children can understand that when they start to feel mad their hands start to get sweaty and their stomach tenses up, they might become better able to know when they are beginning to feel maladaptive emotions and to communicate those emotions before they get out of control. Also, as parents, if we know those physical cues, we can lean into them – “Sam, I notice that you are clenching your fists and squinting your eyes. You sometimes do those things when you are starting to feel mad (or red) – how can I help you right now with that feeling?”

Finally, there are some really great techniques that you can teach your children to help them deal with big feelings when they occur. (please see graphic on next page)

Self-Regulation Activities FOR KIDS



FREEZE DANCE
Linking movement
to our senses to
gain awareness of
their bodies



DRAWING
May improve mood
& give children an
outlet for emotional
expression



WALKING
Can relieve stress
& help release
pent up energy or
emotions



ACT IT OUT
Role play can help
children identify
emotions &
encourage empathy



READ TOGETHER
Helps children learn
to sit and listen &
can assist with
bonding



BUBBLES
Allows children to
practice deep
breathing which
can reduce anxiety



TENSE & RELEASE
Tense & release
various body parts
to ease tension &
support relaxation



LISTENING
Music or meditation
audio can shift
focus from negative
emotions



TIME IN
1 on 1 connection
in a quiet space is
a key component
of self-regulation

One final question... Are there any virtual (zoom, etc) support groups for adoptive parents? It does not need to be with a social worker or trained professionals, but are there any virtual meetings of adoptive parents who want to chat and support each other? Thank you for your time!

We definitely hope to bring this to The Park in 2022. While we have had parent support groups in the past, this is not something we offer currently. We have heard from parents how they wish they had a space to connect with others and we are hopeful to get something on the calendar very soon.

