

Module 2: The importance of emotional accessibility and stable family dynamics

Objectives:

- Teach parents the importance of being emotionally available for their children.
- Emphasize the importance of family dynamics in preventing or contributing to bullying behavior.
- Help parents recognize when their child is seeking emotional support.

Summary of content:

- What it means to be emotionally accessible and why it is crucial for adolescent development.
- Learn how unmet psychological needs can lead to bullying.
- The importance of a stable, emotionally supportive home environment.
- The impact of negative family dynamics on bullying
- Signs that children need emotional support

Lesson 1. Emotional accessibility and its role in adolescent development

Emotional accessibility or EA refers to several parental dimensions (sensitivity, structuring, nonintrusiveness, nonhostility) and two child dimensions (responsiveness to parent and involvement of parent). So, being emotionally accessible means being available to listen to your child's feelings, understanding them without judgment, and offering support when needed.

For adolescents, it's about having a parent who is open to hearing what's on their mind, whether it's about friends, school, or their emotions—without getting angry or dismissive. It's also about showing empathy and connecting with them on an emotional level, which helps them feel seen, heard, and understood.

Scenario: Teen, Max, is feeling frustrated with schoolwork.

Parent notices Max's frustration: Max has been slamming his books down and sighing loudly while studying. His dad, Jake, walks into the room and gently asks, "Hey, Max, I can tell you're upset. What's going on?"

Max shares his struggles: He explains that he feels overwhelmed with the amount of homework and that he's struggling to keep up with everything. Jake listens carefully without interrupting, showing that he's fully engaged.

Jake validates Max's emotions: After Max speaks, his dad says, "I can see why that would be frustrating. It sounds like you have a lot on your plate, and it's hard to feel like you're making any progress."

Jake offers emotional support: Jake sits down beside Max and says, "You're doing your best, and I'm really proud of that. Let's take a short break, and then maybe we can break your work into smaller steps so it doesn't feel so overwhelming."

Jake gives Max the choice to share more or relax: Jake adds, "If you want to talk about it more, I'm here. Or if you need to just chill for a while, that's totally okay too. You're not alone in this."

In this example, dad, Jake, shows emotional accessibility by listening attentively, validating Max's feelings, offering a solution without pressure, and providing space for Max to process or take a break

The adolescent years are full of change, and having a parent who is emotionally accessible provides a safe and stable foundation. It helps your teen feel supported through the challenges they face, making it easier for them to develop healthy relationships, make good decisions, and handle stress. According to Steinberg (2005), emotionally supportive parenting helps teens develop a positive sense of self and is linked to better overall outcomes in life.

Being emotionally accessible doesn't mean solving all your teen's problems or having all the answers. It's about being present, showing understanding, and helping them feel secure enough to explore their own emotions and decisions.

Being emotionally accessible is important for several reasons:

1. Building trust and emotional security

Adolescents are going through a lot of changes, and they need to feel they can trust their parents. When you are emotionally accessible, your teen feels safe sharing their thoughts and feelings with you. According to Siegel and Bryson (2011), when parents are emotionally present and calm, they help children learn how to regulate their own emotions. This trust makes it easier for them to come to you for guidance when they face difficult situations.

2. Developing emotional intelligence

Adolescence is a time when kids are learning to manage intense emotions. If you are emotionally accessible, you can help them understand their feelings and how to cope with them in healthy ways. Goleman (1995) explains that emotional intelligence, which includes skills like empathy and emotional self-regulation, is essential for success in life. By being emotionally available to your teen, you can model these skills and help them develop their own.

3. Strengthening your relationship

Adolescents often pull away from their parents as they seek independence. However, being emotionally accessible keeps the door open for communication and strengthens the parent-

child bond. Fivush (2011) says that when parents are emotionally present, it encourages teens to maintain a connection with them, even during the teenage years when they may seem distant.

4. Supporting better decision-making

Teens are at an age where they are making more decisions on their own, but they often still need guidance. When you are emotionally accessible, your teen is more likely to come to you for advice. Kernis (2003) points out that parental support helps adolescents develop better decision-making skills and resilience in the face of challenges.

5. Fostering resilience

Adolescents face many ups and downs, from school pressures to social struggles. Being emotionally accessible helps them build resilience—the ability to bounce back from setbacks. Masten (2001) found that emotional support from parents is one of the key factors that helps children develop resilience, which is crucial for coping with difficulties later in life.

Example of how a parent can be emotionally accessible to their child

Your teen comes home from school visibly upset, and they immediately go to their room. Instead of ignoring it or getting frustrated, you knock on their door and gently ask if they want to talk. When they do open up, they explain that they had an argument with a friend.

You listen attentively without interrupting, acknowledging their feelings by saying something like, “It sounds like that really hurt you,” or “I can see why you’d be upset.” You don’t try to fix the situation right away or judge them for being upset. Instead, you offer comfort and let them know you’re there for them, saying, “I’m here if you want to talk more or need anything.”

By staying calm, listening actively, and showing empathy, you’re letting your child know that their feelings are important and that they have a safe space to express themselves. This helps your child feel understood and supported, building trust and emotional security.

Lesson2: How unmet psychological needs can lead to bullying

What leads to bullying?

Studies show that children who usually are the victims of bullying tend to be more anxious, insecure about themselves (Olweus, 2000), they feel like they are not good enough, a failure, useless, shameful and even not attractive, lonely, abandoned, poor social skills, high levels of peer rejections, internalizing and externalizing problems (Smith, 2004).

In their Self-Determination Theory, Decy & Ryan (2000) argues that children’s well being mostly depends on the autonomy, competence and the relatedness.

When psychological needs in children are satisfied, they report more well-being, they develop capacity to trust in themselves because just like their parents do, they engage in

activities as an intrinsic motivation in order to explore and find out new things, they develop curiosity and so with that they are not afraid of obstacles that come their way. They display more openness in social relationships, they adapt in new situations, develop new coping strategies and are becoming more resilient when they meet adversity and distress (Vansteenkiste & Ryan 2013).

1. Autonomy

When we say **autonomy**, we refer to giving enough space and possibility for the child to be himself, also psychological freedom, authenticity, determination and permission for him to try and find out new things by himself by trial and error. Through this, the child will learn to also to receive and run into unmet and difficult situations, in order to learn how to cope with that and contributing to development of his resilience and coping mechanism. Encourage the dialog and speaking out their minds, initiative and negotiation.

Instead of dictating everything, give children options within reasonable boundaries. For example, let them choose between two outfits, snacks, or activities. This empowers them to make decisions and feel in control of their lives.

2. Competence

Also when the **competence** need is satisfied, the child will feel able to cope with unmet and difficult situations that may occur. Through that parents have to focus on developing children's skills and abilities. Parents have to be process-oriented by discovering children's talents and emphasize that (Farkas and Grolnick 2010).

If the parent tends to be too critical and too demanding in reaching out to a specific level or qualification, this might lead to feelings of not being good enough, depreciation. This can lead to increased anxiety, distress, constant pressure that they must meet unrealistic expectations, fear of failure, low self-esteem and lack of confidence.

All of these facts contribute to the possibility of them to become a victim of bullying.

Parents should encourage their children to take on tasks that are slightly beyond their current abilities but still achievable with effort. This helps children experience growth and success. For example, if a child is learning a foreign language, the parent might provide books that are challenging but not overwhelming.

3. Relatedness

Relatedness is very important in development of a secure attachment for children, through which they learn that they matter, are understood, their feelings and needs are important to the care givers, when they are appreciated, loved, cared, creating a secure and authentic child-parent connection. So they can feel safe in any circumstances to speak out their mind because they are understood, protected and learn to trust when experiencing distress.

In contrast with that, parents who display a cold connection or rather say no connection at all with their child, where they are mostly unavailable, unresponsive or even rejecting their

child's needs, this might lead to attachment issues, negative affectivity, low self esteem, emotional dysregulation, social difficulties, isolation.

Parents can satisfy their child's need for relatedness by being emotionally available and by validating their feelings. For example, when he feels sad about something or he even cries, phrases like "I understand you're upset" or "It's okay to feel frustrated" help children feel seen and supported. Also, physical affection like hugs, convey warmth, care, and a sense of security.

4. Attachment

Through attachment relationships that develop between a child and a parent during early years, it is founded the child's internal cognitive schemas, which will contribute to the child's relationships later in life with other peers (Bowlby, 1973).

A secure attachment style will enhance the capability of the child to develop positive, trustworthy and caring relationships with others. On the opposite side, an insecurely attached child will face many situations where he can't trust others, can't have healthy relationships and will have a great predisposition to respond with distress and fear to unknown situations (Duncan, 2004; Orpinas & Horne, 2006), cited also in Hansen et al (2012).

If the child won't be provided with a secure attachment style given from their parents from where they might learn that he is understood, he's scared and he's thoughts and emotions are cared so important to the caregiver, in his following relationships as a youngster will learn that he is not worthy enough to be treated well, he will endure disrespectful situations, because he will normalize that.

Also insecure children were more likely to be perceived as victims of bullying due to the fact that they are seen as shy, isolated, vulnerable (Dykas et al., 2008), patterns that are contoured as a consequence to the lack of autonomy, competence and relatedness that we described above.

Anxious attachment: Children may become hypervigilant and overly dependent

Avoidant attachment: May shut down emotionally or learn to suppress their feelings due to the fact that their feelings were never understood and cared to be validated.

Disorganized attachment: Erratic behaviors that appear as a consequence of confusion from their caregivers.

5. Negative affectivity

Negative affectivity is associated with bullying due to their temperament and lack of integrity, secure attachment from their parents and relatedness. Victims of bullying may feel anxious and insecure about themselves, they feel like a failure, stupid, unworthy, not good enough, shameful (Olweus, 2000).

Lesson 3: The importance of a stable, emotionally supportive home environment

A stable, emotionally supportive home environment plays a crucial role in preventing bullying behavior and helping children cope with situations in which they can be harassed and physically-emotionally abused. Several family characteristics are related to bullying, for example, an imbalance of power between the father and the mother, hostile and violent fathers, high demanding environment, harsh parents and lack of freedom to choose (Butler & Plat, 2007).

Nocentini et al. (2018) investigated the role of family and parental characteristics in bullying and victimization, analyzing 154 studies published from 1970 to 2017. The research categorizes family-related influences into three main levels: **contextual family variables**, **relational family processes**, and **individual parental factors**, offering a comprehensive understanding of how the family environment contributes to bullying behaviors.

Regarding **contextual family variables**, issues such as parental stress, psychopathology, and substance abuse are significant predictors of both bullying perpetration and victimization. Exposure to family violence and conflict correlates strongly with increased bullying and victimization, with 95% of studies confirming its impact on bullying behaviors.

Concerning relational family variables, open and empathic communication acts as a protective factor against bullying, reducing both perpetration and victimization risks. Also, higher levels of emotional and practical parental involvement consistently reduced bullying and victimization rates.

Individual parental factors, such as parental beliefs, attitudes toward aggression, self-efficacy, and knowledge about bullying play a role in shaping children's behaviors. However, fewer studies have focused on these factors, so far. Only 25% of studies examined interactions between contextual, relational, and individual factors. Findings suggest that addressing multiple family dimensions simultaneously (e.g., improving parenting skills while reducing domestic violence) is more effective for prevention.

I. Building up resilience

Resilience is a capacity that develops over time after experiencing positive relationships with family members characterized by trust, support, harmony and absence of neglect, abandon or abuse (Sapouna & Wolke, 2013).

Resilience can also be gained and developed after some hard experiences, challenges in which the human was threatened with his stability. It is built up through life, from childhood when people learn how to get over difficult situations with success.

For example, resilience can be favored by family dynamics in the context in which parents communicate directly with their children, offer help, involve in some way in the problems of their children but they also provide them enough autonomy to act and take responsibility for their way of behaving. Let's assume that the child comes home from school after a fight with other peer. Parents may try to communicate with them to find out what exactly happened, trying to understand their child's feeling and needs, offering support, affection and learning them ways for a closure conflict and giving them solutions but also letting them opportunity to choose how to act. This opportunity have to be easily directed by us, supervised. Through time the child will learn how to act in these kinds of situations due to what he learned it's good from his family, what he internalized from his family dynamics.

When we listen to our child and choose to give him enough autonomy and responsibility for his behavior, this way he learns that he can feel safe with his environment, he can trust anytime to open up to us. Likewise, he learns that this is a healthy and a safe dynamic that needs to be promoted in life so that, when he will again be faced with similar situations will learn to act in a way he won't accept that behavior that puts him in danger.

2. Builds self-confidence and self-worth

When the child is raised in a trustworthy environment in which he sees that their parents are treating themselves with respect, reciprocity and love, he indirectly learns that he is worth and refuse to receive negative impact from other people. So that, he learns his value, he builds up his confidence in himself and also those facts will influence his latter journey in his academic actions, relationships with others and work.

3. Encourage healthy conflict resolution

In stable home, children observe healthy dynamics in which their parents resolve conflicts in a rational way, with respect and care for the other, without any kind of abuse and aggressiveness. This will create a way of thinking and acting of a child in the world, will learn to adapt to conflicts in a constructively way.

4. Provides emotional support in difficult times and fosters communication

A supportive home provides care, understanding and open communication so that each other can feel safe to open up when they need something or feel bad. So, when a child will be faced with a bullying situation, will feel more secure in managing their emotions because they learned how to regulate it through their family dynamics. Also, when he will face a difficult time he will feel safe enough to open up to their parents about this fact or to ask them for help. When we, as parents tend to insert a lot of demanding rules, when we are inaccessible for them, when we approach an aggressive way of speaking and expressing ourself or when

we adopt harsh punishment, the child will learn through conditioning that we can't feel safe to express himself, he won't ask for help so we won't know what is happening to him. In our way of wanting to know what is happening to them to protect them by overanalyzing and overdemanding them, we actually will push them aside. Otherwise, when we provide them with a calm communication and with enough autonomy, he learns that he is safe to express and to come to us when in need.

Also, when he grows in a supportive and healthy home, he will internalize that and won't accept any behavior and attitude from other peers that endangers him, will know how to act responsibly in order to end the conflict with respect and dignity, will develop adaptive coping mechanism to face with difficult situations.

Lesson 4: The impact of negative family dynamics on bullying

Negative family dynamics, such as exposure to conflict, can significantly influence a child's behavior and emotional well-being, potentially increasing the risk of them becoming either a bully or a victim. Below, we'll explore real-life scenarios that highlight these dynamics and also discuss how establishing healthy family values can prevent these outcomes.

Scenario 1: Exposure to parental conflict

Situation:

Alex is a 14-year-old boy who witnesses constant arguments between his parents. His mother often raises her voice, and his father responds with sarcasm or dismissiveness. These arguments, which can escalate into shouting matches, happen several times a week. Alex feels scared and anxious, not knowing how to handle the tension in the house. He begins to withdraw emotionally, feeling powerless in the face of the conflict.

Impact:

Alex's exposure to this kind of conflict can make him more likely to exhibit bullying behavior, especially if he adopts the role of an "aggressor" to mask his own feelings of insecurity. He may feel that aggression is a valid way to deal with problems, seeing it modeled by the adults in his life. Alternatively, he may become a victim, internalizing the conflict and withdrawing socially because he feels powerless and afraid to assert himself in healthy ways.

Why this happens:

Children who are exposed to high levels of parental conflict are more likely to develop aggressive behaviors or become withdrawn and anxious. Without effective conflict resolution models at home, Alex might struggle to understand how to handle disagreements without resorting to bullying or becoming a victim of bullying. The inability to express feelings or communicate in healthy ways makes Alex vulnerable to both becoming a bully or a victim.

Scenario 2: Emotional abuse and neglect

Situation:

Sarah, a 14-year-old girl, lives in a household where her father emotionally neglects her. He often ignores her emotional needs, calling her "too sensitive" whenever she expresses sadness. Her mother, who is overwhelmed by her own personal issues, frequently tells Sarah to "deal with it" on her own. Sarah often feels isolated, believing that her emotions don't matter. At school, she becomes easily agitated and starts bullying other students, especially those who seem weaker or different.

Impact:

Sarah's home environment has failed to provide the emotional support she needs to develop healthy self-esteem and coping skills. She compensates by bullying others, possibly as a way of regaining control or asserting power, something she lacks in her own home. Alternatively, Sarah could have become a victim of bullying herself, if she lacked the skills to stand up for herself or communicate her feelings appropriately.

Why this happens:

Emotional neglect can lead to insecurity, poor self-worth, and difficulty with empathy—traits that can increase the likelihood of a child engaging in bullying behaviors. On the other hand, the inability to express emotions healthily can also make children vulnerable to becoming victims of bullying because they don't have the emotional tools to protect themselves.

By focusing on healthy communication, emotional intelligence, conflict resolution, and respect, families can create an environment where children are less likely to engage in bullying or become victims. These values not only help children navigate their social worlds with confidence but also teach them essential life skills that foster positive relationships and resilience.

Lesson 5: Signs that children need emotional support

1. Physical Symptoms

Lack of sleep – Insomnia, hypersomnia as a sign of depression or emotional distress, nightmares

Weight loss- it is observed changes in appetite, they no longer have the need to eat or even struggle to eat

Headaches or other other pains: nausea, dermatological problems, feeling dizzy

2. Internalized symptoms

Anxiety or Depression : Tends to be more emotional and instable, feels guilty, afraid to go to school, always has the need to be "perfect", without worth, very critical of himself, always worried, loss of interests in normal activities or in things he used to really like

Low self-esteem: Feels guilty, not good enough, cognitive schemas like „nobody likes me”.

3. Externalized symptoms

Changes in behavior like withdrawal or isolation: avoiding friends, family, relatives or activities once enjoyed

Aggression, irritability: tend to fight a lot, have conflicts, destroys other things, disobedient, threaten, involved in aggressive conflicts, stubborn, instable, breaking rules, runs from home, steals things, swears, etc.

Regressive behavior: might revert behaviors that had outgrown

Difficulty concentrating and attention: struggle with focus, doesn't finish his tasks

Supporting your child emotionally, especially during times of mood changes or withdrawal, is crucial for their emotional development and well-being. Here are some ways you can be there for your kids when they need emotional support:

1. Create a safe and open environment

Example: Set aside time each day to check in with your child about how they're feeling. Ask open-ended questions like, "How was your day?" or "Is there anything on your mind that you want to talk about?"

2. Listen without judgment

Example: When your child shares something that's bothering them, try to listen carefully without interrupting or immediately offering solutions. Nod, make eye contact, and use phrases like "I hear you" or "That sounds tough."

3. Respect their need for space

Example: If your child is withdrawing or needs time alone, respect that need while reassuring them you're available when they're ready to talk. For example, say, "I can see you're feeling quiet right now. I'm here for you whenever you're ready to chat."

4. Acknowledge their feelings without dismissing them

Example: If your child is upset or sad, instead of saying "Don't worry about it," acknowledge their emotions by saying, "I know you're feeling upset right now, it happens."

5. Offer practical support

If your child says he's being bullied at school, take action and talk to the head-teacher or the school administration about the issue.

Reflection questions:

Have you noticed any signs that your child is seeking emotional support but not expressing it openly? How do you plan to address these?

How do you typically resolve conflicts within your family? What changes can you make to model healthy conflict resolution for your child?

How do you currently support your child's autonomy, competence, and relatedness? Are there areas where you can improve?

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