

The Skillful Teacher

inspiring training for early childhood professionals

www.theskillfulteacher.org

(Emotional) Honesty is the Best Policy

by

Dr. Patricia Nan Anderson

If you've been feeling lied-to a little bit lately, with strange recommendations from the government, elected leaders offering unclear directions for what to do, and agencies you used to trust falling silent or seeming not entirely reliable anymore, then you know how it feels to feel uncertain. People who shade the truth might do it for good reasons, and they think you won't notice. But you do. And, you know what? Children do too.

Researchers at Washington State University wanted to find out if children could tell when their parents were stressed but were trying not to show how stressed they felt. One hundred and seven parents (about evenly split between mothers and fathers) of children ages 7 to 11, and the children themselves, were first asked to think of five topics that cause conflict between them. So, maybe the parents said things like too much screen use, bad language, messy rooms, that sort of thing, and the kids said things that were probably pretty similar. Then, the parents and children were separated and the parents were set a task intended to create in the parents a feeling of stress, like making a speech.

Once the parents were feeling stressed out, the parents and children were reunited and were asked to talk together about one of those conflict areas that researchers had noticed were high on both of this parent-child duo's top-five conflict lists. Half of the parents were asked - privately, so the children didn't know - to try to not show the stress they were feeling because of that speech-making task. The other half were not told anything about hiding their stress levels. These conversations between the parent and child about their top conflict area were observed by people who did not know which parents were told not to show stress. In addition, both parents and children wore sensors to capture sympathetic nervous system changes - changes in heart rate, for example - which, by the way, is how they knew parents were stressed after making a speech. So this is a pretty complicated study, but here's what they found out.

The observers could tell which parents were told to suppress their stressful feelings because both they and their children were less engaged with each other and seemed less warm with each other than parent-child pairs in which the parent was not told to hide their feelings of stress. Hiding their true feelings changed how parents connected with their kids and it changed how kids connected with their parents. Something was being hidden and the secret undermined the relationship. Also, there was a bodily reaction in both the children and the parents when parents tried to hide their feelings.

So what does this mean for us? It means that children can tell when you're worried or upset and are trying to keep that from them. My guess is that this effect is similar for children of all ages, not just elementary school kids. My guess is it might be similar for children and their teachers, as well as children and parents. It also means that our lack of transparency with our kids is interpreted by them as dangerous, something that heightens their feelings of anxiety and insecurity, and that causes a bodily reaction in the children but also in their parents.

When you are feeling stressed – and who these days isn't, for a variety of reasons – it is unhelpful to try to cover up those feelings when you're interacting with children. They can tell. They see this as dishonest, and they have a bodily stress reaction and an emotional stress reaction to it. And so do you. It is better to be truthful, to say to your preschool and older children, "I'm feeling stressed right now because of... whatever," or to say, "I'm having a bad day today," or "I'm a little bit scared." Obviously, you don't want to dump on your children. There's a difference between being honest about your feelings and making a child feel responsible for your wellbeing or scared that you might fall apart. Please be sensible. But keep in mind that trying to bury your feelings doesn't work, for you or for your children. It makes things more stressful, not less.

Honesty really is the best policy.

Source: Sara F. Waters, Helena Rose Karnilowicz, Tessa V. West, Wendy Berry Mendes. Keep it to yourself? Parent emotion suppression influences physiological linkage and interaction behavior. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 2020; doi:10.1037/fam0000664