

Mad, Sad and Glad

From "An Allowance is Not a Bribe" by Allan M. Gonsher, LMHP, CMSW

There really is a difference between how little girls and little boys express their feelings.

An interesting phenomenon occurs when little boys are five or six years old. Their tear ducts dry up. Until then little boys are allowed to have mad and sad feelings. Then at that age many parents tell their little boys to stop crying, because if they continue to cry they'll be labeled as "sissies," "crybabies," or "momma's boys," -- all very uncomplimentary terms.

When mad is a cover-up for sad. Little boys let out their sads through their mads. I don't know how many little boys I've seen in therapy who act mad, but below the surface they're really unhappy. When a father misses a visitation, a little boy might act bratty, but he really wants to cry because he missed being with his dad.

What happens to little boys who don't have opportunities to express their sads? They grow up to be big little boys who express their sads a whole lot more powerfully by being aggressive and abusive.

On the other hand, something strange happens to little girls about the age of five or six. Parents don't allow them to express their anger. Why? Because if little girls express their anger they're considered "too aggressive" or "too tomboyish." So little girls use their sads to let out their mads. There are a lot of mad little girls who pout and cry and whine. These actions aren't always expressions of sad, they're signs of anger. These little girls will just grow up to be big "little" girls who show their mads through their sads.

Glad is the easiest emotion for children to express. Happy children giggle, laugh and have a good time. Many children are so over-programmed with activities they don't have an opportunity to just "hang out". They feel tense, pressured and unhappy. You can create a more pleasant environment for your children by making sure they have time to play with their friends in nonstructured activities.

Creating special occasions. You can create happy times by spending one-on-one time with each of your children, doing some special, fun activity the child chooses. These fun times can be as simple as flying a kite in the park or as elaborate as going to a fancy restaurant for lunch. Use these opportunities to learn what your children are thinking and feeling. But one word of caution, this time shouldn't be used to lecture children about their behavior or school performance. Use these occasions to just have a good time.

Watch for nonverbal signs. You also need to be aware if your children are acting cheerful even when there are problems in their lives. Sometimes children smile and act happy to cover up painful feelings. When this happens, help your children deal with their mad or sad feelings. You can encourage them to talk about their feelings, listen reflectively to what they have to say and offer suggestions if the situation is right.

Children use nonverbal means to express their feelings. Both boys and girls have difficulty expressing their feelings of mad, sad and glad. Your daughter comes home after school, stomps upstairs, slams her door, screams and yells in her room and turns her music up really loud. Through this nonverbal communication she's showing she's angry, but not the reason why. She won't tell you that this dramatic demonstration is because she got into a fight with her best friend at school; you can help draw this information from her.

It's important for you to open up the lines of communication with your children so they can

express their mad, sad and glad feelings. This is a challenging task, because many adults have never learned how to verbalize their own feelings. Yet it's crucial for you to work at helping your children develop this skill.

Here's more you can do:

- Encourage your children to read books so they can learn how other children deal with their emotions.
- Give your children the opportunity to express their feelings through art such as drawing, painting or clay.
- Use every opportunity to listen to your children and let them express their emotions, even if this makes you uncomfortable.