

parenting ourselves an inner journey

By Lela Iselin

Q I have two daughters aged four and 21 months. My four year old is quite an emotional child. She has great difficulty coping with frustration and when faced with a difficult situation she often screams, yells or cries. Although she has good language skills I think that she has difficulty verbalising her feelings at these times and is overtaken by the emotion of the situation. Because she has such intense reactions I think that other children 'push her buttons' to gain a reaction. I find these situations extremely difficult to cope with. I feel her reaction overshadows the behaviour of the other child so that I (and other mothers) become annoyed with her rather than seeing the whole situation.

I am also aware that I have difficulties dealing with these intense reactions as I grew up in a family where emotions were not freely expressed. I have always tried

to allow my daughters to express their emotions, and have always responded to their needs, but am finding that as my daughter gets older I am having more difficulty coping with her outbursts and wondering if, and at what age, she will 'grow out of this'? I am also concerned for her when she starts pre-school next year. I have tried a number of strategies such as taking all of the food additives and sugar out of our diet, telling her to simply call out to me in these situations or to walk away. We try hard to model calm problem solving and non-violent communication at home.

A My younger son had incredible temper tantrums as a young child. I was told that I had them too and so I did my best not to interfere with his tantrums, to let him have them and not to withdraw my love from him while he had them. It was often highly uncomfortable, especially when they happened in restaurants or other public places. When I registered him for kindergarten when he was five, I told the teacher about his emotional tendency. For the school hours he was in her hands and I extended my trust to her to deal with the situation rightly if it came up. Well, he never had one single tantrum at kindergarten. He 'saved' them for times when I was around. Still they became less and less frequent at home too as he got older. He is fifteen now — he still gets emotional from time to time, but not in the tantrum kind of way anymore.

It is one of the signs of getting older that children can 'cope' with their emotions in a more socially accepted way. Although this is a good thing it is also where all of us have made tremendous compromises when we were children. We realised that if we expressed our emotions freely we would not get accepted. None of us were fully met on an emotional level by our parents and had to adapt our behaviour to get at least some love. We all created a much tighter way of being. Doing that we also cut ourselves off from a deep connectedness with life, intelligence and creativity.

Looking back with the understanding I have today I would say, that my son's temper tantrums were already one step removed from what he was actually feeling. On a subtle level he had picked up the link I had with these tantrums.

Having them, I now believe, was an attempt of his to be more fully met by me on an emotional level. Since you say that in your childhood expressing emotions freely was not encouraged it could well be that your daughter picks that up and that her screaming, yelling and shouting is an attempt of hers to get you out of your 'safe' emotional spectrum and meet you at a deeper level.

Why don't you, the next time she is very emotional when just you and her are present, really let in how her emotions affect you. Rather than excusing her, or just letting her express herself, open your heart and go to the place you shut down, when you were a child, and really feel with her, not for her. Rather than you thinking that you have to guide her, let her guide you and gently open up to a world that is still more available to her than to you, the world of pure feeling. Take a leap into the unknown with her. I envy you a little, that you have this opportunity. I have it to a certain degree with my son, but the innocence of a four year old is one of the most precious gifts for our emotional re-awakening. A website which might be interesting for you on this topic is www.enhearten.org.

As there are always many levels we can approach a situation from, like you have done; minimising the sugar intake is certainly a good idea. You may also want to consider taking her to a session with and osteopath or a cranio-sacral therapist. Many osteopaths claim that fifty percent of all babies, and mothers for that matter, need adjustments after birth. A good homeopath might find a remedy which makes it easier for your daughter to channel her feelings in a more socially accepted way.

Even though any of the above may help to heal imbalances your daughter may have (we all have them in one way or another), nothing is as important as how you relate to her. For her, what you think is less important than what you feel. The more in contact you are with that yourself, the deeper she can trust you. You can both assist each other in becoming more fully available to the richness of an emotionally healthy life. You know how, not mentally, but with quiet, gentle, emotional openness and creativity. You can trust that fully.