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Finding Joy

BY SUSAN E. MURRAY

Webster defines joy as both a noun and a verb. As a noun, Webster describes it as a “feeling of great pleasure and happiness.” As a verb, Henri Nouwen described it this way: “Joy does not simply happen to us. We have to choose joy and keep choosing it every day.”

A baby will express joyful emotions somewhere in the second or third month, with cooing, chortling and smiling. At about the fourth month a baby will laugh spontaneously. Once again, this is an expression of joy. At first a baby will laugh when being touched gently. Later he or she will begin to respond to sights and sounds that elicit joy.

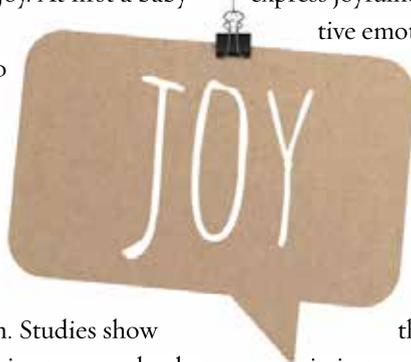
Joy, surprise and curiosity are not the only emotions a baby will express! There are also expressions of discomfort, anxiety, frustration and fear. Our babies are very tuned into the emotional moods of those around them. Studies show that even as young as three months, babies react to the depressed moods of their mothers. This doesn't mean you are a bad parent if you are depressed or are not always joyful and smiling. But it does mean you have a responsibility to be as emotionally healthy as possible and commit to not “take your moods out on” your child.

Studies show that babies, affected by the negative moods of their mothers, can cope and learn to soothe themselves. After crying and fussing a baby will often turn away and comfort himself. That's an important task of infancy, to begin to deal with feelings. Babies also soothe themselves by sucking their hands or fingers, by moving into a different position and by finding something else to do. We want babies to begin learning to recognize and handle all their feelings, but it is not a baby's job to have to

regularly adjust to the negative or depressed feelings of the adults in her life.

Children deserve abundant opportunities to feel and express joyfulness. It is a way to stimulate a child's positive emotional development. The greatest source of comfort and positive feelings in the world of a baby is people, especially their primary caregivers. And children bring us joy as well. In reflecting on how her baby brought her joy, one mother recalled, “The main thing was the joy of touch. She was so soft, so melting. I never touched so much as in the first of infancy.” A dad said, “There is joy in just watching her change. For us, she's such a very, very good person. She's so marvelous. She likes the cat, she likes the stroller. Everything is an adventure for her.” In expressing the joys of parenting a toddler, one dad said, “I have these proud father moments every now and then when I think, *That's my boy!* Those are wonderful moments!”

As God keeps his promises, may we each bring joy to those we love in the morning, and the mid-day, and the evening! God gives each of us this promise, *The Lord thy God in the midst of thee is mighty; he will save, he will rejoice over thee with joy; he will rest in his love, he will joy over thee with singing* (Zephaniah 3:17 KJV).



Susan E. Murray is professor emerita of behavioral sciences at Andrews University, certified family life educator, and licensed marriage and family therapist.