

Understanding the child's emotional world

A mini-guide for parents and early childhood professionals

INTRODUCTION

Understanding a child means learning to read their emotions, accepting them, and supporting them. From the earliest years of life, children experience an intense inner world that is often confusing for adults.

Sudden tantrums, unexplained crying, overwhelming fears, and boundless joy are not excesses. They are the expression of an emotional system that is still developing.

This mini guide aims to provide simple and essential pointers to better understand what children are going through and to adjust our adult behavior in order to promote their emotional, relational, and affective development.

1. EMOTIONS IN YOUNG CHILDREN

Between birth and around 6-7 years of age, a child's brain functions primarily on an emotional level. This means that they feel things very strongly and react quickly to what they experience. However, the part of the brain that helps them calm down, think before acting, control their actions, and put their emotions into words is still developing. It is not yet fully ready to function like an adult's brain.

This is why young children can throw tantrums, have trouble calming down on their own, or be unable to explain how they feel. They don't do this on purpose : their brains are simply still developing.

Over time, with the caring support of adults and the experiences they have, this ability to manage their emotions will gradually strengthen.

All this means that :

- Children experience very intense emotions.
- They do not yet know how to manage them on their own.
- They need an adult to help them through them.

When a child becomes emotionally overwhelmed, it is neither provocation nor a lack of willpower. It is a cry for help.

2. WHAT EMOTIONS REALLY MEAN

Every emotion has a purpose.

- Anger signals frustration, an unmet need.
- Fear indicates a need for security.
- Sadness expresses loss, separation, or overload.
- Joy reflects a sense of security and connection.

Emotions should not be silenced, but listened to.

A child who feels emotionally understood develops greater inner security.

3. EMOTIONAL MEMORY

Even if children do not remember events precisely, their bodies and emotional systems record their experiences.

What matters is not so much what happens, but how children feel supported in what they are going through.

Children who are comforted learn that their emotions are acceptable.

A child who is ignored learns to bury them.

4. THE ROLE OF THE ADULT : BEING A SAFE HAVEN

Adults play a fundamental role :

They are a reference point, an emotional container, a translator of the child's inner world.

Supporting an emotion means :

- Welcome with empathy and steady presence (mindfulness)
- Naming what is being experienced
- Providing a safe environment
- Not judging the emotion, even if the behavior needs to be regulated

5. THREE ESSENTIAL GUIDELINES FOR EVERYDAY LIFE

1. Name the emotion before correcting
"I can see that you're very angry."
2. Stay calm even when your child isn't
Your calmness helps them regulate their emotions.
3. Reassure them after the storm
Emotions pass, but the bond remains.

**Understand your child's emotional world is a journey.
It's not about being perfect, but about being sufficiently present, attuned, and aware.**

