

Insights Into a Child's Day

A letter to parents in the book *Daniel's Day* by Mary Gordon



Daniel's day starts with the disappointing discovery that he has wet his bed yet again. This scenario plays itself out across millions of households every morning. The helplessness of little children who make what they deem to be mistakes—such as bed-wetting—renders them vulnerable to criticism, bullying and shaming by others. No human being learns anything constructive through shame, blame or ridicule. In Daniel's family there was an empathic response, where the mother's wrap-around hug eclipsed any words that could have been offered.

Empathy is the ability to understand how another person feels and to feel with them. The need to be understood is universal whether we are five or fifty; all of our worries or upsets are calmed when we feel we have been heard or understood. This doesn't mean that the problem has been solved but when our feelings are recognized and accepted, so are we.

For children who have difficulty with transitions like getting up and getting dressed, the morning is often a difficult time. Daniel's cape is his transitional object, which helps him through much as a soother helps to comfort a baby in transitions. Daniel is aware that he feels comforted by his cape. This self-calming strategy shows that he has identified a way to regulate his feelings. Many children his age have a special blanket or stuffed animal that serves the same purpose. This is not to be considered a weakness or an immaturity. It is appropriate problem solving and shows that the children have insight into their emotional needs.

Some children can become easily overwhelmed by stressful events in their day. The difference between a child's perspective and an adult's perspective is that adults have the experience of knowing that tomorrow is a new day. Children's lives are lived very much in the present. They don't understand the concept of the future. They also have limited experience problem solving disappointment and emotional wounds. Therefore, their unhappiness in the moment may overwhelm them.

Daniel's morning is further complicated by his high physical sensitivity. He is sensitive to temperature and discomfort. The term "highly sensitive" refers not only to emotional reactions but also to sensory reactions.

As Daniel's day progresses, he has challenging experiences, which are mitigated by the understanding—the empathy—of his mother, his friend Nicholas and his father. By experiencing empathy, we become empathic. We see Daniel showing empathy when his little brother feels embarrassed about falling down.

One of the most hurtful things that a child can hear from a friend is “I don't want to play with you”. For a five year old, it is emotionally devastating to be left out. Helping children gain insight into their feelings and demonstrating acceptance and support are powerful ways that adults can nurture children's positive mental health and happiness.

Once children start childcare or school, they are in the care of others whose philosophies about love, respect, and understanding may complement or contradict what they are used to at home. Throughout the day, a child has dozens of interactions with emotional flavour and while some of these interactions cause great excitement and happiness for the child, others cause upset because of hurt feelings. When children leave from home with a full tank emotionally, they can withstand some of the distress. Unfortunately, parents cannot always protect their children from the thoughtlessness or cruelty of others, and those who have responsibility for children are not always in a position to see hurts or injustice. The key to creating supportive environments for children is to raise empathic children so that they will help one another, much as Daniel took empathic action in helping his brother.

Children have emotional surges at various points in the day, typically during daily leave-takings and reunions with their families. These are peak emotional transitional points. Very often at the end of the day when the child first sees the parent, the floodgates open. It is important for children to know that no matter what happens, they will be loved unconditionally.

Reading this book with your child supports the development of traditional literacy. The development of emotional literacy is also supported when you and your child together answer the question beside the mirror, “what different feelings have you felt today”? This mirror may encourage meaningful discussion from a child who is not used to sharing feelings.

It is valuable to invite your child to retell the story of his or her day at bedtime. If you listen carefully, you will hear about a world that will give you rich insights into the personhood of your child. You will be able to appreciate the complexities and colours of your child's day.