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Understanding Your Child's Feelings

Guest:	Josh and Christi Straub
From the series:	What Am I Feeling? (Day 1 of 3)
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Bob: There's a connection between our emotions—the things we're feeling and the godly virtues that the Spirit is working to produce in the lives of believers. As parents, we want to help our children understand that connection, as they learn how to grow and walk in grace. Here's Josh Straub.

Josh: If you're growing in the fruit of the spirit, if you're walking with God, we should see ourselves becoming more kind to other people, being more loving of other people, stepping into the shoes of other people, and just being able to empathize with them in a conversation where it's not about me, it's not about my story, it's not about what I can get out of this relationship—it's about your story and how can I serve you?

Bob: This is *FamilyLife Today*. Our hosts are Dave and Ann Wilson, and I'm Bob Lepine. How can we help our children process their emotions and then know how to respond to those emotions in a godly way? We're going to talk about that today with Josh and Christi Straub. Stay with us.

And welcome to *FamilyLife Today*. Thanks for joining us. So, I want to deal with an epic parent fail right at the beginning here.

Dave: You got a confession?

Bob: I don't think there was ever a time when my kids were growing up—I really cannot remember a time when I looked at them and said, "So, how are you feeling right now?" I mean, I don't know that I was even conscious of that fact that that was something I should be . . .

Dave: Not one time?

Bob: I don't—I may have.

Dave: I'll tell you what, Bob, you are looking across the table at the mom who asked that question every day to our kids.

Bob: This was big for you. Is that something that happened in your home when you were growing up?

Ann: No. No. [Laughter] I think it was because I had sons and marriage is such a big topic and it's so instrumental to us and it's so important for legacy and future. Because I had sons I thought—they need to know what they feel to be able to communicate. I understood this very well when our nine year old—I was walking out of his bedroom at night and I said, “Love you C.J.” And he said, “Love you, too, mom. But, mom, mom—you've told me one time—you never have to tell me again.” And I thought, “His poor wife. What is she going to do?” And so I thought, “I need to help them with their feelings to be able to communicate that for marriage.”

Bob: Hopefully we're going to help a lot of moms and dads avoid my fail. We have Dr. Josh Straub and his wife, Christi, joining us today. Welcome to *FamilyLife Today.*

Christi: Thanks for having us.

Josh: Thank you so much. We're honored to be here.

Bob: Josh has been here before. Christi , it's your first time here. This is something that you guys both are pretty passionate about. Did it start with you, Christi? Or start with your husband?

Christi: I think it started more with Josh. We're both counselors by trade and education—so I think we already come from that angle of life. But, really, it was when we started having babies.

Ann: Did your parents ask you that question?

Christi: In my home—yes.

Josh: No. Definitely not. I had amazing parents, but we talked more about sports or—I meant it wasn't necessarily about our feelings. I was a counselor and I'd been working with juvenile delinquents and trouble families and I had studied—my doctorate's in counseling—attachment base. So, it's all about emotional safety and security and the importance of that for kids.

I remember when we first had kids, our early years of having babies was awful. [Laughter] Christi's pregnancies were terrible.

Christi: That's putting it mildly.

Dave: Give me a feeling word [Laughter] of how awful it was.

Josh: Disappointed. Exhausted.

Christi: Angry. Grief.

Josh: What I realized was that we had so many decisions that we had to make early on. You can't even leave the hospital before you have to make a decision about whether or not you're going to immunize your children. You have the breastfeeding/bottle feeding debates. You have the co-sleeping debates. You have spanking/not spanking/time ins—all these—and we didn't even tough BPA-free products or gluten-free diets or . . . It's like when you first become parents—it's like so overwhelming.

For us, we were like—no, wait a minute—we were a little bit older. I was 30 when we got married, and so, a little bit older having kids. We have counseling degrees—how can this be so difficult? So, I went back into the research and I started looking at—if I'm a 90 year old grandfather, great-grandfather—and I'm sitting in my rocking chair and I'm looking back through the years. I want to ask myself, “What would have really mattered? What did matter in raising those kids?”

It's not going to be the bottle feeding or the breastfeeding, or the spanking or not spanking. But what really would have mattered? Every research study that I looked at, for every major outcome we would want in our kids, linked back to emotional safety. And the ability for them to be able to understand what they're feeling, why they're feeling that way, and the reason is because that leads to empathy. And it leads to relationships.

It was like, “Whoa. We don't have to get caught up in all these other little things. Let's keep the end game in mind.” Thats where it all started.

Bob: You guys, and I should have mentioned this earlier—you've created a book for parents to read with their kids, to their kids. I'm thinking you could start this when they're two or three years old; right?

Christi: Absolutely.

Bob: The book is called, *What Am I Feeling?* And it's a kids' book—it's a giant sized picture book with lots of color and not a lot of words in it. At the end of the book, there's a chart—I saw the chart and I thought of those charts in the hospital—you know, the pain continuum [Laughter] on a scale of 1-10, with the happy and the frownie faces.

This has nine different feeling faces and words that go with it—all designed to help our kids be able to self-diagnose what's going on in my heart; right?

Josh: Yes and at the end of the day, I think that one of the biggest goals for all of us is to raise kids who love God and love others well. I can remember, I was working with juvenile delinquents—that's who I worked with mostly in my counseling years—and the very first thing that I would do with any juvenile delinquent that I met with was that I would give them a feelings chart.

Part of my counseling with them was to help them get to a place where they feel remorse for their victims. The reality was that most of these guys—pretty much every single one I ever met—didn't have a relationship with their dad, didn't know who their dad was, or there was just brokenness there at some level. And there was never feelings talked about. They couldn't even define what they were feeling. So, when Jesus says to love your neighbor as yourself, the reality was that these kids didn't even love themselves. They didn't know how to. They didn't even know what they were feeling.

So, for all of us to truly know what we're feeling and why we're feeling that way—that's the beginning of empathy, it's the beginning of being able to step into the shoes of another person and love them well—is for us to be able to recognize what we're feeling and take care of ourselves.

I think that was really where—if we can get this in our kids at an early age—as early as the preschool years—man, you're setting them up for a lifetime of success.

Ann: One of the things you said is that the sign of a healthy brain is being able to verbalize what we feel and why we feel it. That was fascinating to me. Why is that a sign of a healthy brain?

Josh: That's the beginning of being able to control your emotions. We talk a lot about anger being a secondary emotion; right? So, one of the exercises we'll typically do—especially with someone who's in a relationship (particularly marriages) is that we'll do this chair exercise. You have two chairs, sitting one in front of the other, and typically, what ends up happening is that the anger is what's in the front chair—that's what's coming out at my wife—like when I'm mad at Christi and I'm coming out in anger—it's usually anger in that front chair.

A lot of times what we'll do is we'll have couples and we'll say, “Okay, now that you've expressed the anger, I want you to go sit in that second chair, and tell me what's behind the anger.” A lot of times, our behaviors, what we say to one another, how we act toward one another—because we don't understand what we're feeling, we don't know what we're feeling and eventually, long term, as it relates to our overall health—our physical bodies feel when we're suppressing emotion.

Proverbs 16:32 says (and I love this verse): Patience is better than power and controlling one's emotions than capturing a city. You can't control your emotions if you don't know what your emotion is.

Bob: So, Christi, I'm thinking about a three year old who is just raw emotion; right? Anything's not going the way they want it to go and it's pretty clear to everybody in the room that they don't like what's going on. In that moment, and I've watched my kids do this with their kids, they're trying to help their kids put words to what is it that you're feeling right now, what's going on.

Or they're saying things like, “I know you're feeling frustrated.” They're giving them that vocabulary. Again, I'm thinking back—this is something I never did—why is this so important?

Christi: I think this is why, I mean, you look at a toddler throwing a big meltdown in Target or something, and if you've had kids, you can relate, because it's just pure, raw emotion. Think about anger. We feel emotions viscerally in our body, but until we're taught . . . I mean, just like color—this is the color red. We don't know what that feels like. We don't know what that is until we—you know, my cheeks are hot. Your fists are clenched, your teeth are clenched. You feel this hot rage go through your body.

Can you imagine? I mean, if we think back to the toddler—that feels huge in a little body. It feels huge in our adult body. And they are learning to put labels on—it's like organizing and calming the brain. And that's why the feelings chart is so powerful, especially for young children. And really, even adults.

You'll see a lot of adults, men more typically—I'm not sure why that is—who maybe have never been given emotional language, or they grew up in a home where feelings were not talked about. Certain feelings were dismissed or punished. Or maybe certain feelings are prioritized over others—that's a whole thing that even us as parents of young children can give the message that I want you to be something.

Typically, happy. It's a message that the child receives—that happiness is the desired emotion that mom and dad want from me. So what happens when they start to feel something in their body that's not congruent with happy? They can start to learn from a very early age to pretend. This is where we start stuffing and we can learn very early on to these false senses of being—of not being our true selves, because we are having to hide what is actually true of us.

So, for a child to learn at an early age to look at a face—we talk about mirror neurons—our mirror neurons are what—the baby hears a loud noise, they turn to their caregiver, mom, or dad, to see, “Should I be scared? Or am I okay?” When mom smiles, peace is restored to a child. Whereas if they see a big reaction, it's like—oh, I am to be scared, and so they react with fear.

What we're teaching kids to do early on is to look at another face—this is what we do as parents; right? They look at us to start to mirror what joy looks like, what sadness looks like, what anger, what fear looks like. When they can start to see what that looks like in another face, it starts to organize the brain.

Dave: Well, it's interesting as I look through your book, especially the chart . . .

Christi: Yes.

Dave: Here's what I thought—now you're doing this—is this true? I thought this is as much adult parent training [Laughter] as it is child. I thought, “I need this chart . . . “

Bob: You just blew their cover right here. [Laughter]

Dave: Honestly, it's like I want, when Ann and I get in a fight, I want to be able to walk over to the wall and go, “Right there. That's what I'm feeling.” I want to point at angry or jealous. You know what I mean? So how much of this is the child learning how to process an emotion by watching mom and dad, or mom or dad—understanding how they—I think a lot of parents don't even know how. So that's what we're transferring, rather than the opposite. So, talk about that.

Christi: You figured it out. We wrote a kids' book because parents have time to read a kids' book to their kids. But really, it's not just for the kids. We all need this and so many of us—we maybe just grew up in a home there were certain emotions that took over. It could be that you grew up in a household where there was a lot of anger present. It could have been a lot of fear, a lot of grief or sadness.

A lot of us have lived in homes where there was mental illness, so there might be anxiety, depression. There might have been loss of a sibling. We grow up feeling and being surrounded by a lot of feelings. Even as adults we come kind of limping into parenthood—carrying out own stories, and we're not always sure of how do we organize that for ourselves.

Dave: You know I can't imagine, honestly, what could have been different in my upbringing. Think about this—you don't know this, but my mom and dad married 25 years—my dad walks out. So, divorce. I'm seven years old and my little brother, five and a half years old—dies, about six months later of leukemia. And we move to another state.

It would have been wonderful if my mom could've put a chart up on a wall and said, “David, what are you feeling right now?” You know, I never processed it. Never really even talked about it. It wasn't like you weren't allowed to and it would have been nice for my mom to go . . .

Ann: Yes, imagine the pain she was living through.

Dave: Here's what I'm feeling. Here's what we're feeling because now it's just us, trying to forge a new life. What a resource. Again, not just for the children, but for the adults and for the parents as well. There's an interesting quote I found in your book that I'd love you to talk about because it leads from the emotional stability to the spiritual maturity.

You make this comment—I'm even thinking about my own life—about how to grow up spiritually and become mature when there's this brokenness emotionally in my life and

in so many people's lives. You make this comment—you don't think you can really be spiritually mature unless you're emotionally mature. Talk about that.

Josh: You know, it's interesting because—and I think I heard Pete Scazzero talk about that a number of years ago and emotionally healthy spirituality—this idea that you could only be as spiritually mature as your are emotionally mature. You know, you think about the fruit of the spirit—love and joy and peace and patience and kindness and gentleness and faithfulness and goodness and self-control—but those are all intertwined together; right?

You can have a personality that's gentle or you can have a personality that's patient—but to have all of those intertwined together is a fruit of the spirit. But that takes emotional maturity as well. If you're growing in the fruit of the spirit, if you're walking with God, we should be seeing ourselves becoming more kind to other people, being more loving of other people.

Stepping into the shoes of other people and just being able to empathize with them in a conversation where it's not about me, it's not about my story, it's not about what I can get out of this relationship—it's about your story and how can I serve you?

Bob: My thinking about emotions, I think throughout my life, has been that emotional maturity means that I'm in control of my emotions. I hear you saying that it's more than just being in control of your emotions—you can be in control of them without necessarily diving in and understanding them and fully feeling them. You're saying, “No, emotional maturity goes beyond just being able to turn it down.”

Christi: When I learned, in my own personal journey, that joy and happiness are no more important in my life than being able to feel anger, sadness, grief—that those negative emotions are just as important and the ability to come in and out of those—not to live there, but in order to be able to come in and out of emotions. And that's what we want for our kids, too.

So typically, we get triggered by certain emotions, certain feelings that we do not like to see in our kids. We don't like them because it's triggering something in our story. That's something to put a pause button on—just to pay attention to. Just put your finger on it--”Man, why is it when my kid throws a—you know, gets angry, cries. If there's fear.”

I go to the roof and okay—where is that coming from? You don't have to fix it—you're just starting to pay attention—that's the beginnings of it. My favorite line in the book is, “A feeling is just a feeling. It's not in charge of you.”

Josh: If you take a look at *What Am I Feeling*, the children's book, it really is Philippians 4, put into practice. When Paul was writing from prison, by the way, which I'm sure were not very good conditions—comparable to America's prisons today.

He's writing, “Be anxious for nothing, but by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving”--so your gratitude is toward God alone—“thank you God that you're a good God, thank you that you care for me, thank you that you care for me, thank you that you love me, thank you that my security is in you. I'm anxious right now. I'm scared right now. I'm sad right now. I'm feeling rejected right now.”

“In prayer and supplication, make your requests be made known to God.” So really, what Paul is saying here—I talk about Paul being the first neuroscientist. Paul is saying voice label your anxiety. Label your feelings, give them over to God—in thanksgiving—and the peace of God which surpasses all understanding will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. It's not until after that that he writes, “Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, pure—anything excellent, praiseworthy—What? Think on these things.

I think that Paul understood that when we're overwhelmed in negative emotion, we don't think straight. I believe that in a finite way, that's our job as parents—to be that peace that can calm our kid's brains when they're emotionally overwhelmed. And that's what we hope that you can do with this book—is to say, “What are you feeling right now?” And then, let's ask God, let's take a deep breath and let's ask God what to do with that feeling.

Bob: Can you think of a time, in the last two months, with the Straub kids, where you've had one of these—“let's process and work through this moment” with your kids?

Christi: Oh my word. [Laughter]

Josh: Which one? [Laughter]

Christi: Okay. Let's think. Was it yesterday? The day before? I remember that we walked through this with our son. He was going through a really difficult time. Actually, this is going back a little bit, because this actually where one of the stories in this book came from.

He was going to a new school and just experiencing a lot of fear, but he didn't know how to put that into words. He would cry, there was acting out, there was anger. It was covering this whole mess of stuff, which is what emotions often come out like.

I remember one morning—this was months in to school—we encouraged him every morning and we're cheering him on and encouraging him and I said, “Buddy, what does it feel like?” And he said, “Mom, I just feel so flippy in my tummy.” And I was like, “Oh, Bud, that's a great description of fear. I know what that feels like.” So, we used that description in the book—feel flippy in my tummy.

It was when he started to figure out what he was feeling was fear, that it started to at least put it in a box, where it was like, “I'm afraid to go to school.” That's what all this is—it can come out sideways, often; right? When we're not dealing well with an emotion,

it will come out sideways, somehow. I think this is where we, as adults, get to be their mentors. We get to be their models and we get to show them that we feel too.

There was one day—actually the same kid—he had a test at school and he was real nervous about it. I said to him (we were actually going to speak that day),--it was a big group of people—and I was nervous. And I said to him, “Buddy, you know mom has to go do something today and I'm honestly really scared, too. So, how about you go to school and you do your test and you do the thing that scares you. And I'm going to go and I'm going to do the thing that scares me, and then maybe when we come home tonight together, we can talk about it. Maybe we'll feel a little more brave.”

I think that in those moments, they start to recognize—I'm never going to outgrow fear, I'm never going to outgrow sadness—it's never going to go away. It's just a part of life, but it doesn't get to be in charge of us.

Dave: You were saying that adults still have flippy in their tummy. [Laughter] What a great phrase and we all have. I mean—in what you just shared—even Josh, when you walked through Philippians 4, I thought, “What an action step for somebody listening to this program right now.” What if right now—you had named it—you say in your book, “Name it to tame it.”

Josh: Yes, yes.

Dave: You can't really get control of an emotion until you identify it. Philippians 4:6-7 is sort of that process. You're right—Paul is a neuroscientist.

Josh: Yes.

Dave: It's like he's a PHD counselor [Laughter] saying that you've got to speak this out loud to God—the anxiety, the worry. What if we did that right now? Tonight. Before we did it with our children. What would that look like to say, “God, I'm going to speak this out to you. I'm going to thank you in all things.”

Ann: It's a form of confession as well.

Dave: And walk through that process what you walked us through earlier. What a beautiful, beautiful way to name it and process it with God. And then model that with your children.

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