



Mirabelle Maslin

Infants and children
An introduction to
emotional development

Mirabelle Maslin, 66, is an author and has been a therapist for more than thirty years, helping individuals, couples and families to understand and process their inner stresses and dilemmas in order to be able to relate in ways that help them to connect more closely.

In this interview Mirabelle addresses some of the points she makes in her latest book *Infants and Children: An introduction to emotional development*

What is good parenting? And what would you recommend to parents who want to give their children a balanced emotional life?

The task of a parent is to be alongside their offspring – new human beings – in a way that connects sensitively with who their child is at every stage, with the purpose of enabling the child to be conversant with and confident in the world, reaching out into it as he grows and develops.

One of the fundamental aspects of good parenting is to establish a close confiding relationship between the child and the parent, in which the child is not hesitant or fearful about communicating with the parent about anything.

“A child drinks in the very essence of who the parent is.”

An interview with **Mirabelle Maslin**
Author of the new book, **Infants and Children: An introduction to Emotional Development**

When children try to get their upset feelings heard, most of us parents do what the culture recommends. We try to get them to stop crying, and to stop being angry. Why do we do that, and what are the consequences of this?

People stop children in the same way as they themselves were prevented from expressing certain kinds of emotion when they were children.

If we ourselves have been left uncomfortable around these emotions, then, when we see them in someone else, we feel our discomfort keenly and want to stop what seems to be its source.

If children do not receive sufficient helpful interaction about the full range of their emotions, their emotional life is not fully integrated. I saw a DVD that was a lecture by an eminent biochemist about the consequences of misuse of mercury. When he reached the part of his lecture where he was going to talk about the impact on the health of children, he made a clear statement that the audience would hear anger in his voice as he covered the subject matter. This was a man who must have been helped with the emotion of anger when he was a child. He knew that anger was an integral part of his makeup, and he was able to include it, entirely appropriately and helpfully, in his communications. The expression of his anger was not dramatic. It was clear, and it was a useful and appropriate part of the communication that he was making. If he had been uncomfortable with his angry feelings, he would either have delivered this part of his lecture in a way that was apparently devoid of emotion, or he may well have sounded very angry, expressing this emotion in a forceful way that would have been likely to distract the audience from the content of what he was saying.

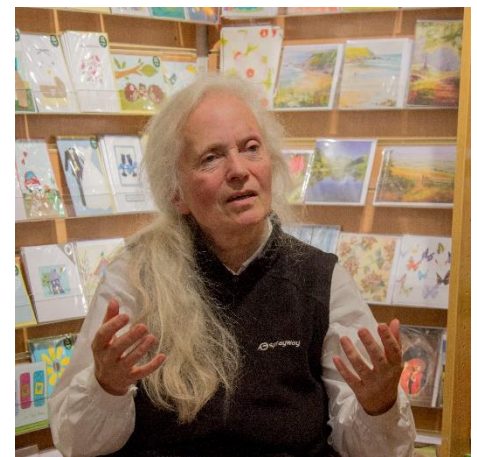
Those who have not been helped with their emotions, to name them and

understand them, are left still needing that help. The need does not evaporate just because it is being ignored or suppressed. Some people become very insistent about their emotions, in all kinds of ways, whereas others become overly helpful or compliant people, or are withdrawn.

“The real ‘perfect parent’ is the ‘good enough’ parent – the one who has an adequate objective grasp of his strengths and his limitations, and of what life can throw into the arena of day-to-day living, together with an ability to make realistic plans for the future.”

You say that the importance of helping a young child to identify and name the feeling states that he experiences is paramount. Why is this so important?

This is the first stage in the process of becoming emotionally literate. If a child is not helped to name Mummy, Daddy, items of clothing, doors, tables, and so on, his day-to-day interactions run the risk of being very limited. How is the child going to be able to include in his interactions the kind of emotions he has, if he has not first been helped to identify these emotions and name them?



Mirabelle Maslin talking to parents at the One World Shop in Edinburgh

On the back cover of your book you say that the parent's ability to be able to see and understand things through the eyes of their child is fundamental. Could you please comment?

For a child to be able to understand enough of what is happening around him, he needs to know that someone understands how he sees things before they explain how things actually are. It is only through this process that explanations will really make sense. Without it, a child will replicate what an adult is doing or saying without actually understanding it.

“ *A child's developmental need to identify with his parents or parent figures, and, as he grows, with his peer group, can leave him very vulnerable to absorbing a cultural 'norm' of life revolving around acquiring new things.* ”

You say that a temper tantrum is, in essence, a cry for validation of the feelings of anger and rage. Could you please say more about this?

It is usually the case that when a child is smiling or laughing, it is easy for us to be pleased and to say that the child is happy, or is 'having fun'. However, when a child is shouting or crying, loudly and protractedly, and perhaps is throwing himself around, it is commonly the case that the 'adults' disapprove of this kind of expression, and do everything they can to make it stop. Yet, how else is a child able to show the turmoil that is going on inside him – a turmoil for which he needs help? And the first stage of that help is for someone to identify for him some of the intense, overwhelming feelings that are present in that state of turmoil. Only then can the child slowly progress to the stage where he can talk about being angry rather than 'being' the anger.

And what about love and hate? It is so easy to have a child expressing loving emotions towards someone. The emotion of hate is just as real and necessary a state, and yet it is hard for many to accept. The grandson of a friend of mine told her that he hated his younger sister. Having recently read my book, my friend managed to hold back her immediate reaction, which was to say that he shouldn't feel like that, and instead said, 'That must be very hard for you.' She noticed that straight away her grandson relaxed, and it was clear to her that this was because she had accepted the emotion that he was struggling with.

Who would benefit from reading your book?

This book can help a wide range of people to broaden their understanding of themselves and others.

What projects are you working on at present?

I have recently completed the preparation of a book of essays and lectures by the psychiatrist who was the editor of 'Infants and children'.

I have prepared and published a short collection of poems that was written by a single mother with two children. The subject matter is to do with what society commonly calls 'love' between a man and a woman, the desperate feelings that can be evoked in the 'dumped' person when one abandons the other, and the eventual rising out of the despairing state.

I have also prepared a collection of poems from a man who, despite suffering from physical disability, is devoted to caring for his family of five daughters.

How we relate to infants and children is of crucial importance, so I am donating copies of my book 'Infants and children' to a number of public libraries in Scotland. I have included in the donation a copy of 'The Supply

Teacher's Surprise'. This is a short story that I wrote for a Primary 6 class several years ago. It is the story of how the class members divide into groups and arrange creative activities for themselves for the summer holidays.

“ *I have known many people who, while searching for inner calm, look for it in places where it simply cannot be found.* ”

What do your plans for future projects include?

I would like to collect together some more 'cameos'. Many readers of 'Infants and children' have enjoyed reading the cameos and have found them helpful.

I am writing several essays about needs, dilemmas and difficulties of elderly people. There are strong connections between the needs of the very young and those of the very old, which we would do well to take into account.

I am taking time to accustom myself to the absence of my main editor, who died last summer. He was closely involved in all my books, and our conversations were invaluable.

And, of course, I'll be growing things in my garden and my small allotment. This year I have a wonderful crop of French beans!

What did you enjoy most about writing 'Infants and children'?

I found that it was very important to me to include a story for small children. When this idea came into my mind, it felt absolutely right.

What was the most challenging part of writing your book?

The most challenging part was to work out how much to include, and how best to express the material in a way that readers could absorb.