THE NURTURING PROGRAM
for Families in
SUBSTANCE ABUSE TREATMENT & RECOVERY

Developed by the
Institute for Health & Recovery

THIRD EDITION
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Welcome to the Third Edition of the Nurturing Program for Families in Substance Abuse Treatment & Recovery! While the curriculum's core components, including its values and principles, remain the same, this curriculum contains three new sessions specifically dedicated to working with men and fathers. This is the result of meeting numerous fathers in addiction treatment programs who expressed a strong desire to be in their children's lives, and wanted support to do that. Men were extremely forthcoming and honest in focus groups, expressing their frustration about the dearth of support for fathers in recovery.

The material on fathers can be used in place of, or in addition to, existing sessions. If used as alternatives, we recommend replacing Topic 3: Families & Substance Use, Topic 8: Body Talk, and Topic 12: Schedules & Routines.

We have learned a great deal since the first edition of the Nurturing Program for Families in Substance Abuse Treatment & Recovery was published in 1995. That original curriculum was adapted from the Nurturing Program for Parents & Children Birth to 5 Years (Bavolek, 1999) to address the specific needs of families affected by parental substance abuse. It focused on the effects of substance use disorders on families, parenting, and the parent–child relationship, incorporating Joan and Eric Erickson's eight themes of growth spanning the life cycle and the Stone Center's Self-in-Relation theory of women's development. Combining experiential and didactic exercises, this approach was designed to enhance parents' self-awareness and thereby increase understanding of their children. A second edition of the curriculum was published in 2006, and incorporated our understanding of the impact of mental illness and trauma in the lives of individuals who are affected by substance abuse. An understanding of trauma and mental illness remains a focus of this edition.

This third edition of the curriculum has many of the original activities and information and utilizes the same format as both the first and second editions, but has been updated, offering different group activities and optional sessions for fathers. Although the Nurturing Program is designed to enhance parenting relationships, regardless of gender, this edition does offer additional sessions on being a father.

The Nurturing Program recognizes the traumatic impact that experiencing or witnessing violence has on families, and has integrated activities to assist in addressing the consequences of these experiences. Domestic violence represents a formidable risk factor to the healthy development of the capacity to parent. It can be traumatizing particularly within the context of parent–child relationships, in guiding a child’s behavior, and where safety and protection are major concerns.

This new edition of the curriculum offers information and activities incorporating the work of Alicia F. Lieberman, Patricia Van Horn, and Nancy Suchman. Their approaches, using Child–Parent Psychotherapy, promote interventions...
that focus on the parent–child relationship and interaction, and attempt to strengthen the parent and child’s capacity to be emotionally attuned to each other’s motivations and needs, known as reflective functioning. These concepts and approaches are integrated throughout this edition of the curriculum, which requires that parents not only be attuned to their own feelings, thoughts and needs, but to also be attuned to the feelings, thoughts and needs of their children and loved ones. In order to nurture others, you must learn to nurture yourself. This can only be achieved through the ability to be attuned and the capacity for reflection. Nurturing encompasses these core concepts.

The impact of substance use, mental illness and trauma on parenting, the parent–child relationship, and children can be devastating. Parents may experience loss of self-image as capable, effective parents. They may have a diminished capacity for empathy for periods of time. In addition, the parent–child bond may be weakened by periods of physical and/or emotional unavailability of parents and the resulting gaps in parents’ knowledge of the experiences, milestones and growth of their children. It is hoped that participation in this parenting program can be both the beginning of restoring what has been lost in the parent–child relationship and a time for parents to re-establish the strength of their connections to their children so that parents and children can heal together.

Statement of Philosophy

The Nurturing Program for Families in Substance Abuse Treatment & Recovery is built on the principles of relational development. We believe that success and satisfaction of parents and children improve as certain essential factors become more vital and pervasive within the relationship. These factors are—

**Mutuality:** Characterized by a dynamic, interactive sensitivity and responsiveness.

**Authenticity:** Freedom and ability to live within the relationship at a high level of exposure and vulnerability.

**Empathy:** Process by which the disclosure and sharing of oneself leads to a heightened sense of self, and of understanding another; self-awareness and self-acceptance enhance awareness and acceptance of others.

These elements have been defined as the crucial factors characterizing healthy development as conceptualized in the Relational–Cultural theory of women’s development, explored and espoused by the Stone Center for Developmental Studies at Wellesley College, Wellesley, Massachusetts. This fuller understanding of women’s development takes into account the reality that women are highly affected by their relationships, both past and present; that women develop a sense of self through these relationships; and that women strive to maintain a sense of connectedness to others. The authors of this curriculum believe that these factors are essential in the development and functioning of all parenting relationships, regardless of the gender of the parent; that parents and children are highly affected by their relationships with each other; that parents and children develop a sense of self through their relationships with each other; and that the parent–child relationship requires a sense of connectedness in order to experience healthy growth and mutual satisfaction.

Parents often perform the greater part of the work involved in building relationships with these characteristics, but as children grow they participate more and more fully in shaping and nurturing the relationship. This curriculum is designed to be a model for this process, by promoting a high level of participant initiative (including an array of active, participant-directed exercises) and identifying and engaging participant abilities, experiences and histories.

Throughout this curriculum, our underlying assumption is that many of the resources necessary to enhance the relationship between parents and children, and among family members, are brought to the program by the participants. We seek to have participants explore, discover and cultivate their assets and those of family members. The curriculum addresses gaps in information, the need to practice new skills, and the processing of changing patterns of behavior and interaction.

During these sessions attention is paid to the participants’ success in learning through a variety of techniques, as well as identifying skills and behaviors which have, in the past, not achieved desired goals. Families affected by substance use disorders are often unaware of the wealth of such successes and the experience they bring to parenting. Parenting relationships are frequently so marked by the parents’ sense of shame and failure, and the child’s sense of confusion and chaos, that the courage, clarity and resources that are brought to bear in entering recovery can be overlooked. By
highlighting these resources and skills, the exercises work to strengthen and support recovery. Success in recovery and success in parenting are inextricably woven together.

Parents and group facilitators participating in this program are collaborators in the process; the model is both interactive and instructional. Activities created by participants are included, and the role of group leader may be assumed by a parent. The curriculum is designed so that parents’ hopes, experiences and expectations can be explored and incorporated into the curriculum framework.

This process of collaboration enhances the operation of the principle of nurturing the parent, while expanding the parents’ ability to transmit this nurturance to their children.

Activities aimed at deepening self-awareness, heightening self-esteem and strengthening self-confidence are built on a process of—

• Exploring, discovering and celebrating abilities
• Encouraging and providing safety for experience of feelings which had been limited or repressed
• Practicing application of parenting skills first for oneself, and then with one’s child.

Nurturing the parent means that the understanding, skill and strength acquired through these activities will be valuable to parents in a variety of relationships and life experiences: enhanced communication skills, improved time management, relaxation and self-care, improved self-esteem, improved ability to empathically understand another person, clarity of values, as well as interest in and enjoyment of play.

The icebreaker questions, activities, and discussions in this curriculum are also intended to strengthen the parents’ capacity for reflective functioning, that is, the parents’ capacity to be curious about and reflect on thoughts, feelings and intentions and the connection between these inner states and external behavior. Parents in recovery often struggle with making sense of their own feeling states, and linking their own and their child’s actions with what is going on internally.

A crucial element in this process of discovery and celebration is the focus on diversity. This principle operates through the participants’ exploration of their own ethnic, cultural and familial history, values and experiences. This exploration may bring to light ways in which a participant’s heritage has been lost, and ways in which participants can reconstitute, where necessary, and celebrate their heritage.

Investigating loss or damage often calls for recognizing how substance use disorders can be experienced in families also experiencing racism, sexism, homophobia, poverty and discrimination. The curriculum incorporates anti-bias activities by using participants’ experiences and observations to explore and deflate bias and bigotry.

The family is also the focus of the curriculum, specifically in those sessions which address substance use and recovery. Understanding addiction as a disease affecting all family members, across generations, underlies understanding that recovery is also a process that affects all family members, across generations. Ample opportunity is provided to enable parents to explore their own sense of shame and failure which arises from substance use; activities are included which enable parents to recognize the skills and abilities which carried them through the active addictive process to the process of recovery. Opportunities for parents to explore their fears as well as their strengths in explaining substance use to children of different ages and abilities are included.

Lastly, this curriculum takes a developmental approach in two areas: the learning involved in this program, like the experience of recovery, involves reworking of tasks and stages of life, and re-evaluation and re-patterning of principles and actions. We do not assume that there is an end-point to be reached; we do assume that increasing success and improved satisfaction can be achieved in all areas. Second, we intend this curriculum to be effective for parents with children of all ages and stages. Again, this is an area where exploration of the participants’ own experiences and situations is crucial. We do, however, include specific portions relating to early childhood and the relationship between infants and young children and their recovering parents. This information provides a framework for exploring the developmental process of recovery, starting with establishing a trusting relationship and moving to competence and beyond. By taking this approach, we believe we can help parents enhance their understanding of themselves and their children.

Guidelines for Implementing the Program

This section provides information useful in establishing the Nurturing Program for Families in Substance Abuse Treatment & Recovery, including recommendations regarding
group membership, group facilitators, settings, and a list of materials needed to implement the program.

**Program Sessions & Topics**

There are 17 topic areas presented in the program, in addition to three topics focused on men and fathers. Each topic area represents a group-based session of 90 minutes. However, due to the number of activities and the depth of the information presented in each topic area, more than one session may be helpful to adequately increase parents’ knowledge and build their skills. Each segment is designed to be presented in 90 minutes. However, the curriculum is also intended to be presented with flexibility in order to be responsive to the needs of participants. Issues raised regarding childhood experiences may require more than the allotted 90 minutes to process. Therefore, while there are a set number of segment topics, there may be a variable number of sessions. Agencies and group facilitators should feel free to take initiative in adapting this curriculum to their particular needs and client populations.

Three sessions have been created specifically for men. These groups are designed to address specific concerns that men have related to substance use and parenting. These three sessions may be used in addition to the 17 basic topic areas, or substituted for any topic at the discretion of the facilitator. Suggested topics for substitution are provided in the Introduction above. While participating in these sessions, men are able to examine what it means to be a man, what place they have in the lives of their children, and the challenges that exist as they struggle to balance parenting and recovery.

The facilitation of each topic in the curriculum is made more effective by the ability of the facilitator to press through his or her own barriers to change. The topics presented may be difficult to present without the buy-in of the facilitator. For example, it will be difficult for a male facilitator to present the topic *Feelings*, if he does not understand the importance of his own expression of feelings. There may be a tendency to avoid certain topics or not present them in the most beneficial way for clients if facilitators are uncomfortable with the topic. The key is to stay open to the transforming experience that occurs when a nurturing atmosphere is created which allows clients to look safely at how they were parented and the behaviors that resulted. This journey may be painful, but the openness of the facilitator to provide safe passage by first taking the journey him- or herself in order to point the way adds richness and depth to the group experience.

**Format**

Each lesson is introduced by a section entitled, “Information for Group Facilitators.” This section summarizes the theoretical background and principal concepts taught in the session and provides guidelines for implementation. It is necessary for group facilitators to familiarise themselves with this information before presenting each lesson. Resources for further information are listed at the end of the curriculum.

Following “Information for Group Facilitators,” is the statement of teaching goals and learning objectives. The learning objectives constitute the program’s outcomes.

In order to assist in implementing each lesson, the materials needed for that lesson and guidelines for advance preparation are presented. It is recommended that group facilitators devote time prior to the scheduled group time to review the information for group facilitators, in addition to goals, objectives, materials and preparation needed. Each session contains the handouts needed for that session. Copies will need to be made in advance of the session.

The activities of each lesson are presented in the “Group Facilitation” section. This includes concept presentations, practice sessions, role-plays, and group activities. Each lesson opens with an icebreaker intended to bring participants’ focus into the group and establish connections among participants. Each lesson ends with a wrap-up intended to bring the group process to closure. Following the wrap-up is a notes section listing some questions or areas of concern which may arise during the session.

**Who Should Participate**

The *Nurturing Program for Families in Substance Abuse Treatment & Recovery* is designed for—

- Adults who are in treatment and/or recovery for substance use problems, and who are in parenting relationships with children
- Partners of parenting adults with substance use problems, including those in treatment and recovery
- Extended family members who may be parenting the children of adults with a substance use disorder.
Families come in many shapes and sizes, and substance use by one member of a family affects all members of a family. Therefore, the entire family can benefit from treatment, and from parenting services. Success and enjoyment of this curriculum can be enhanced when it is used as part of a program of services for the whole family. To achieve that, this program may also be used in conjunction with other Nurturing Program curricula, either as a first course or as an adjunct to those curricula which incorporate parent–child activities. Participants should be drug/alcohol free during group sessions and it is preferable they be engaged in a recovery program. However, parenting services such as this group model can often be used as a motivator for, or a first step toward, recovery.

Participation by Non-Parenting Adults

This curriculum has also been used successfully when non-parenting adults are included in the group. This may be the case when the program is offered in residential treatment settings, where all residents participate, regardless of status as parents.

An essential element of the work of this program is enhancing self-awareness, building self-nurturing skills and promoting nurturing relationships. The developmental approach of this curriculum includes examination of adult development, with emphasis on reworking developmental issues in recovery. A participant need not be a parent in order to benefit from these components.

Inclusion of Children

Programs implementing this curriculum may be interested in providing groups for children while their parents participate in this group. Stephen J. Bavolek’s Nurturing Parenting Program—which is available for purchase at www.nurturingparenting.com—includes activities for children, as well as parents and children together. Utilizing this model, family mealtimes and parent–child activities can be incorporated into the sessions.

In addition, the companion volume to this curriculum, entitled Family Activities to Nurture Parents & Children, contains several enjoyable activities for the entire family, and can be used to incorporate parent–child playtime into a program for families.

Settings

To ensure that this curriculum is responsive to the variety of strengths and needs families present, it is intended to be used in a flexible manner. That is to say, it may be used in both inpatient residential treatment programs, as well as outpatient programs. It may also be presented through family or community service agencies that do not otherwise provide formal treatment for substance use disorders including early intervention settings and adult education settings.

Staff

Wherever the curriculum is provided, it is important that staff responsible for the program have a solid understanding of substance use and its effects on families, as well as fundamental knowledge regarding parent–child relationships and child development.

In order to ensure that program facilitators bring expertise in these areas, agencies are encouraged to implement the program using two or more group facilitators (although this is not required). Substance use treatment programs have found it most helpful to collaborate with early intervention programs in offering this curriculum.

Both programs benefit from the sharing of expertise. Facilitators of this curriculum should be comfortable and confident in participating in activities calling for self-disclosure. Experience shows that group facilitators who can model their practice of self-care can enhance participation and learning by group members.

Program Completion

Before beginning the group, you may want to define what will constitute a program completer (a person who has met the basic requirements of the program to be considered in completion) and let your group participants know how many sessions they are expected to attend in order to complete the program. In the last group session, which includes a celebration of the group’s efforts, we encourage giving out certificates of completion for attendance at the groups. It is sometimes helpful for participants to know how many weeks of attendance constitute completion of the program and the receipt of the certificate.
Note

We encourage all participants to receive a certificate of participation even if they haven’t completed the designated number of sessions.

Grounding

Many people who have experienced violence/trauma and problems with substance use struggle with overwhelming emotions and memories or dissociation and numbing (Najavits, 2002). Grounding helps attain balance between the two, allowing individuals to be conscious of their feelings and be able to tolerate them. Grounding provides an easy way to disengage from emotional pain, including drug cravings, anger, sadness, or self-harm impulses. It is a set of strategies that allows for distraction from difficult feelings and can be used anytime, anyplace, or anywhere, without anyone having to know it is being done. This detachment from feelings allows one to gain control over feelings and stay safe. We recommend becoming familiar with grounding techniques, sharing them with group participants, and utilizing them as appropriate during group sessions.

One strategy for grounding is physical grounding. This involves orienting your physical body to your immediate surroundings by paying close attention to touch, by literally touching objects around you (e.g., your pen, notebook, or chair) and noticing their temperature, weight, etc. Another example of physical grounding is to pay attention to your breathing, taking slow, deliberate inhalations and exhalations, possibly repeating a calming word to yourself during each breath. For more information on grounding and grounding techniques, refer to Seeking Safety (2002) by Lisa Najavits.

Obtaining Resources

Not all programs and agencies have budgets for these additional materials. There are ways to obtain some of them without additional costs. Many localities now support recycling centers, either through school systems or children’s museums. These centers distribute materials donated by businesses and industries, materials such as paper, three-ring binders, wooden blocks, fabric, plastic containers, markers, etc. These centers have been a useful resource in obtaining group materials. Also, Family Activities to Nurture Parents & Children, the companion work for this curriculum, provides directions for enjoyable projects for adults and children, and includes recipes for making paste and paints. Many of these activities have been successfully used in conjunction with Nurturing Parenting Program curricula, helping participants discover or re-discover talents and abilities and develop a sense of self-sufficiency in getting needed materials.

Materials Needed

- Film: This Hurts Me More Than It Hurts You*
- Photographs of babies and children expressing emotions from Feeling Faces,* or from magazines.
- Adult-Adolescent Parenting Inventory (AAPI-2)* for pre- and post-testing of program participants
- The Modern Book of Massage: Five Minute Vacations & Sensuous Escapes by A.K. Rush (recommended)
- Certificates of program participation and completion
- Infant dolls/receiving blankets
- Masking tape
- Flip chart (or paper in large sheets)
- Markers and crayons
- Scissors
- Paste or glue
- Tempera paint; finger paint
- Brushes, sponges for painting
- Rulers
- Pencils
- Paper in various sizes, colors and textures
- Large tree branch in a pot (or a mobile)
- Massage oil/lotion (1 small bottle per 4 participants)
- Paper towels or cloths to wipe off lotion
- Set of approx. 20 wooden blocks for every 2 participants
- Lively music for aerobics; soothing music for relaxation (preferably music representing different cultures/styles)

* This Hurts Me More Than It Hurts You, Feeling Faces and Adult-Adolescent Parenting Inventory (AAPI-2) can be purchased through Family Development Resources, Inc. at 1-800-688-5822 or www.nurturingparenting.com.
Parents in early recovery are often puzzled and overwhelmed by their emotions. Substance use can cause distortion and/or suppression of emotion, including paranoid projection, denial and numbness of feeling. A substance abusing lifestyle often is so isolated that opportunities to accurately observe and judge the emotional state of others are limited.

Emotional responses that have been repressed or distorted may now begin to appear out of proportion to events. People may be unable to determine the cause of an emotion. Some may have difficulty evaluating whether their emotional responses are appropriate to current events, or are instead arising largely out of responses to past events that were denied, repressed or distorted. The emotional tasks in recovery are:

- Identifying and accurately naming emotions
- Differentiating emotions firmly rooted in a current event or situation from those emotions re-appearing from the past
- Learning healthy, caring ways of expressing feelings

**Key Ideas**

Goals of these sessions are to increase familiarity and comfort with a range of emotional responses of both adults and children, to understand the function of emotions in our lives, and to provide some ways of managing emotions that may seem mystifying or frightening. (If parents consistently respond to current situations in a way that seems out of proportion to the events, they may need some counseling or other form of help in understanding how past, unexpressed emotions may be affecting current relationships. Be prepared to make referrals for this service.)

In these sessions, we want to help parents increase their:

1. Tolerance and understanding of their own emotions and their children's emotions.
2. Ability to respond to their own emotions and their children's emotions in a nurturing way.

The framework we use defines the differences between nurturing, neglectful and hurtful responses to feelings:

**Nurturing Response:** accurately acknowledges and names the feeling; accurately identifies the stimulus; does not judge the suitability of the feeling; provides a healthy way of expressing the feeling, i.e., one that does not injure self or others, one that does not place blame for the feeling or responsibility for the feeling of another

**Neglectful Response:** minimizes the feeling or the cause of the feeling, invalidates the feeling, dismisses the importance of the feeling or fails to respond to it
Hurtful Response: criticizes, attacks or punishes the person for having the feeling

Parents in early recovery often are confused about which emotions to share with children and how their emotions should be expressed in their children's presence. Parents' confusion can be increased when, as sometimes happens, recovery programs define some feelings as being unhealthy or dangerous (e.g., anger and emotions associated with romantic relationships in early recovery). As a result, persons in recovery may feel ashamed or a sense of failure if they experience these emotions. You need to emphasize that, in and of themselves, emotions are neither “good” nor “bad.” What is important is how we respond to emotions.

Note

Parents may benefit from a discussion of the importance of allowing children to bring up memories of times when their parent was actively drinking or using drugs. Parents who are confronted with this situation may feel extreme guilt and not be sure how to respond, or they may respond in anger at their child for bringing up this time from “the past.” Allowing children to bring up these memories, listening to the child's experiences, and encouraging conversation about their feelings in these situations can greatly assist in re-establishing trust between parent and child.
Getting Ready for Group

Goals

• To increase parents’ awareness of the range of their emotional responses and experiences
• To increase parents’ awareness of the range of their children’s emotional responses and experiences
• To increase parents’ confidence and competence in managing their own and their children’s emotional responses and experiences

Objectives

• To enhance parents’ ability to recognize and accurately label their emotions
• To enhance parents’ ability to recognize and accurately label their children’s emotions
• To increase parents’ ability to respond to their own and their children’s emotional responses in a nurturing way
• To increase parents’ ability to teach their children about emotions and about nurturing ways of managing emotional responses

Materials Needed

• Paper for writing and for drawing
• Basket or coffee can to collect paper
• Pens or pencils
• Paint (regular or finger paint)
• Markers
• Drawing paper
• Pictures of children’s faces
• Flip chart

Prepare Ahead

On separate flip chart sheets, write the relevant items accompanying the following headings, as described in Group Facilitation:

• Icebreaker
• Nurturing, Neglectful and Hurtful Responses
• Wrap-Up

Have additional flip chart sheets available for recording participant responses as needed. Prepare copies of vignettes used in the small group activity.
Group Facilitation

Recommended time: one 90-minute sessions

1. Welcome & Icebreaker

Welcome group members back today. Explain that in today’s group we want to become more familiar with feelings, with the purposes they serve in our lives, and with the ways in which they may be unhealthily stuffed or distorted. Present the icebreaker (displayed on flip chart):

One feeling I have that makes me uncomfortable (or that I am not sure how to handle) is...

Distribute pencils and small sheets of paper. Ask group members to write their responses on the paper, and, when they are ready, to put the paper in the can or basket. After all the papers have been collected, ask a member of the group to assist you by writing down the feelings on flip chart paper as you take the papers from the basket and read off the responses. With the group, determine which feeling is named most often. Circle that feeling on the flip chart, and proceed with a brief concept presentation.

As an alternative, you may decide to play Feelings Charades: Volunteers come forward and pick a paper out of the basket, and then act out the feeling using only body language or using only sound, but no words. If the group needs some enlivening, this may be a good way to begin.

2. Range of Feelings

Explain that the focus of today is to develop skills in understanding feelings: understanding what they are, what purpose they serve, and learning ways of responding to feelings. We particularly want to pay attention to learning nurturing ways of responding to feelings, for ourselves and for our children. We will focus on one feeling as an example, but the process can be applied to any emotion.

Determine which feeling is listed most frequently as uncomfortable. If there is not a clear selection by number of times mentioned, make a selection in the following way: Ask group members to look at the list generated by the group and pick two of the emotions listed which they find most confusing or distressing to experience. Reading through the list, record the number of votes for each emotion listed. Use the emotion listed most often
as the subject of discussion. Mention again that we will use one emotion as an example of a way to analyze and understand emotions.

Focus on the selected emotion, and ask the group to brainstorm the following series of questions:

- What does a person look like when she is experiencing this feeling? Ask group members to display faces or body postures that demonstrate the feeling. Encourage all group members to participate and respond to each other’s physical expressions—describe to each other how they look.
- What does a person sound like when she is experiencing this feeling? Again, ask group members to make the sounds or use the words that are associated with the feeling.
- What are the sensations or other feelings associated with this emotion? Point out to the group the range of expressions and sensations that feelings elicit. Feelings are often expressed and experienced in more than words, although we often depend on words to describe them. Note that young children usually do not have the words to describe their feelings. Therefore, sounds, body language and physical sensations are extremely important forms of communication.

Next ask the group: “What purpose does this feeling serve? What emotion does this feeling give us?”

Again, list the brainstorming responses on the flip chart. Encourage the group to think of ways the feeling brings useful information (e.g., sadness may indicate a need to grieve a loss or a need to reduce isolation, anger may indicate a need to protect oneself from hurt). Next ask the group to brainstorm: “What are ways of responding to the feeling?”

Encourage the group to think of all sorts of ways one might respond, regardless of what the group’s opinion of the response is.

3. Nurturing, Neglectful & Hurtful Responses

Explain that there are three general ways of responding to feelings. Display the flip chart with the words “Nurturing, Neglectful and Hurtful.” Explain:

**Nurturing Responses** accurately acknowledge and name the feeling, accurately identify the stimulus, do not judge the suitability of the feeling and provide a healthy way of expressing the feeling (i.e., one that does not injure self or others, one that does not place blame for the feeling or responsibility for the feeling on another). A nurturing response encourages people to experience and understand their feelings and to think of themselves as capable of managing feelings in a constructive way. For example, if a pet dies, a nurturing response would allow for and acknowledge the sadness and
encourage grieving (e.g., through a pet funeral, by gathering pictures of the animal, sharing memories).

**Neglectful Responses** to emotions deny the presence of the feeling, minimize the feeling or the cause of the feeling, dismiss the importance of the feeling or fail to respond to it. Neglectful responses often imply that the person having the feeling, or those around her, is incapable of effectively, constructively managing the feeling. In the example of the death of a pet, a neglectful response might be: “It’s only a dog. You can always get another one,” or “What can I do about it, anyway?”

**Hurtful Responses** to the feeling criticize, attack or punish the person for having the feeling, or they deny the person the right to have the feeling. Abusive responses often assume that an attack or judgment by the person having the feeling is contained in the feeling itself. When faced with sadness over the loss of a pet, a response may be, “Stop that stupid crying. I’ll give you something to cry about.”

Now, review the list of possible responses, and ask the group to identify which of the responses are nurturing. Press the group to describe why a response is nurturing.

For additional activities on feelings, please see Appendix B.

4. Children’s Feelings

Explain that sometimes giving children the opportunity to paint or draw their feelings helps children express and understand their feelings in a constructive way. Point out that one difference between adults and children in having and expressing feelings is that children often are not able to use words accurately to describe what they feel. They need adult help to do this. Children also respond to stress with emotion. Lacking the words and the cognitive ability to express the feelings can cause children to have tantrums or act out. Lack of attention, response or validation from adults can also cause children to act out.

They may believe it is the only way to be heard. Therefore, it is very important for adults to help children find child-centered ways of expressing feelings, using the nurturing responses, and being aware of any neglectful or hurtful responses that may arise. One way to assist children is by helping them name and identify their feelings (e.g., “Wow, you seem really frustrated…”).

Have the pictures of children’s faces ready for display, and provide several blank sheets of flip chart paper. Ask for a group member to assist in writing down the group’s responses.

Display a pre-determined selection of pictures, and ask the group for each:

**What feeling is the child displaying?**
Encourage the group to discuss how they know what the feeling is. What are the cues and clues?

**What is a nurturing way to respond to this feeling?**

Ask the group to think, “If that child were me, how would I want someone to respond to me?”

5. **Large Group Activity**

Tell the following story and use the questions for discussion:

Your two-year old child is playing outside when a big, friendly neighborhood dog comes bouncing into the yard, frightening the child with his enthusiasm. The child bursts into tears, and you have difficulty consoling him. After several minutes of crying, you say, “That’s enough crying! It’s time to pull yourself together and stop crying!”

Discussion Questions:

- What is going on for this mother in this moment?
- How would you respond if your child was crying and you were not able to console him?
- What are other ways to respond to the child in this moment?

In this scenario, we don’t have a great deal of information about this mother or child. Possibilities related to her frustration with her son’s crying include:

- The mother may not have been allowed to express feelings as a child, and therefore feels overwhelmed with her child’s strong feelings.
- The mother may feel inadequate by not being able to console her child and anxious by his sadness.
- The mother and child may have had a difficult morning filled with tears, and this incident is just one of many, causing the mother to run out of patience with her son.

The point to emphasize is the importance both of allowing children to experience their feelings and helping children understand what took place—for example, “That dog scared and surprised you, but look, you’re safe now”—and of helping parents identify the root of their responses to their children’s feelings.
6. Small Group Activity

Ask the group to form three small groups (by counting off in threes). Give each group one of the following vignettes, and ask them to describe the feelings the child might be having. Then they will identify hurtful, neglectful, and nurturing responses, in that order.

1. Your 14-month-old is brought to visit you. You have not seen him in 2 months. You remember him as making sounds, and some words, laughing a lot, and always being on the move. He was cruising on furniture when you last saw him. Now, he is quiet and sits very still on your lap. What might he be feeling? What are hurtful, neglectful and nurturing responses?

2. Your 8-year-old daughter has a best friend with whom she spends almost every afternoon after school and all day Saturday. Suddenly, and without explanation, her best friend appears to be favoring another girl and to be snubbing your daughter. What might your child be feeling and what are hurtful, neglectful and nurturing responses?

3. Your 14-year-old daughter has a huge crush on a boy in her class. Today, on the way home, she saw him holding hands with another girl. What might she be feeling? What are hurtful, neglectful and nurturing responses?

Ask the group to identify one person to record the group’s discussion. Give each group a sheet of flip chart paper on which they should record the child’s feelings and the hurtful, neglectful and nurturing responses. Explain that they will have 10 minutes to process this activity, and then they will report to the larger group (if time permits).

7. Wrap-Up

Tell the group it is time to end. Thank the group for their efforts today. Ask if anyone has something that needs to be said before we end. Allow brief discussion. Inform the group that we will be looking in other sessions at the differences between nurturing, neglectful and hurtful responses, including more nurturing ways of caring for our children and ourselves. If the group has not chosen their own way to close, close today’s session by completing the following statement (displayed on flip chart):

One way I can be more nurturing/accepting of my own feelings is...