S11E2 - The Words I Never Had

I want to start by asking you something.

When you were a child, when you were scared or sad, overwhelmed or angry, what happened?

What happened in your house?

Not what should have happened.

What actually happened?

For some of you, someone came.

Someone sat with you.

They named what you were feeling, and they made it smaller just by being present.

You were lucky.

The research tells us that those early experiences, being emotionally held, are some of the most protective things that can happen in childhood.

But for a lot of people, more than we talk about, nobody came.

Or somebody came, but they fixed it.

They redirected it.

They told you to cheer up, calm down, or stop being sensitive.

Or the feeling was met with discomfort, impatience or silence.

And that's not because they didn't love you.

It's because the adults around you hadn't been given the words either.

And so you grew up.

You became a parent yourself.

And you looked at this child in front of you, this child who was scared or sad or angry or overwhelmed, and you wanted more than anything to do it differently.

To give them what you didn't have.

And sometimes you didn't know how.

Because nobody had shown you.

Today's episode is for you.

I'm Ash Costello from The Resilient Kid, and this is the story of the words we never had, and how we learn them even now.

I want to tell you about a dad called David.

No relation to mine.

And when I talk about his son Marcus, no relation to my brother-in-law either.

They're just general names, common names, so I can use some stories which are a composite of clients.

David was referred to us because his son, Marcus, who was 12, football mad, and usually the loudest person in the room, had gone quiet.

Not quiet in a restful way.

Quiet in a way that makes us, as parents, feel our stomach drop a little bit.

Withdrawn.

Flat.

Spending more and more time in his room.

Snapping when he did come out.

And when asked what was wrong, saying:

"Nothing."

"Nothing."

"I'm fine."

"Leave me alone."

David, his dad, sat across from me in our first session, and I could see immediately that he was a man who deeply loved his son and had absolutely no idea what to do.

He was uncomfortable in the room.

Shifting in his seat.

Looking at his hands.

Clearly more at home on a football pitch with his son, or in a work meeting, than in a therapy office talking about feelings.

He said to me:

"I'm not really good at this sort of thing. Talking about feelings and that."

And I said:

"That's okay. Tell me about Marcus."

And he did.

He talked about his son with such pride, such love, and such fear.

Fear that there was something wrong.

Fear that he was missing something.

And fear that maybe he was the wrong kind of dad for a son who needed help of this kind.

Then I asked him:

"When you were 12 and something was wrong, what did you do with it?"

He thought about it long and hard.

Then he said:

"Kicked a ball. Went to my room. I just got on with it."

"And if you were upset, really upset, could you have told someone?"

He shook his head immediately.

No hesitation.

"No. That's not how it was in our house. You just got on with it. My dad was the same. His dad was probably the same."

He said this very matter-of-factly.

No pity.

Just a statement of fact.

Then he said something I have never forgotten.

It stayed with me.

"I don't even know if I know what I'm feeling half of the time. How am I supposed to help him with what he's feeling?"

That question.

That honest, vulnerable, quietly devastating question.

That is the question at the heart of this episode.

So welcome.

Let's get on with it.

You know I like to delve into the research around this kind of thing because the research tells us why it matters.

What David described, growing up in a home where emotions weren't really managed, just pushed through by getting on with it, where the language of feelings wasn't spoken, has a name in research.

It is called low emotional expressivity in the family environment.

Studies consistently show that children who grow up in this kind of environment, where feelings are not named, not discussed, and not validated, can develop what we call alexithymia.

This comes from the Greek meaning "no words for feelings."

It's not a diagnosis.

It's a spectrum.

Many of us sit somewhere on that scale without knowing it.

It's the experience of knowing something feels bad, but not being able to identify what it is.

Or having an emotion in the body—the tension, the flatness, the restlessness—without being able to label it, locate it, or talk about it.

In our sessions with children, one of the biggest things we do is help them recognise it in their body.

Where is it in your body?

How does it feel?

Where does it show up?

Is it in your hands?

Your chest?

Your stomach?

Your head?

We really help them identify where it shows up first physically.

Research by Professor Mark Taylor, who studies this at the University of Toronto, found that people with higher levels of alexithymia, that difficulty giving words to how they're feeling, show significantly greater difficulty regulating emotions, maintaining close relationships, and accessing support.

So asking for help when they need it becomes harder.

Not because they don't feel things.

But because they've never been given the tools to work with what they feel.

And here's the intergenerational piece.

The thing that connects David to Marcus.

Research on emotional socialisation, led by Joseph Ciarrochi and colleagues, shows that children learn how to relate to their emotions primarily from watching the adults in their life.

When a parent dismisses their own emotions by pushing through, getting on with it, not naming what is happening internally, whether they can or not, children learn that emotions are things to be managed and suppressed, not felt and expressed.

Just hear that again.

Children learn that emotions are things to be managed and suppressed, not felt and expressed.

When a parent doesn't have the words, the child often doesn't get the words either.

Not because of any failure of love.

Because language is taught.

It's not innate.

And you cannot teach what you've never been given.

But here's where it gets hopeful.

Because the research also tells us something remarkable about neuroplasticity: the brain's capacity to change and constantly rewire itself.

Dr Dan Siegel, again, an old favourite of ours, talks about mindsight.

That is the ability to observe and understand your own internal process, what's happening in the brain.

We are the only species who can study the brain.

And this shows us that emotional literacy is a skill.

And it can be learnt at any age.

I have a couple of clients in their 80s, and when I started talking about this, they said to me:

"Oh, but you know that old saying, you can't teach an old dog new tricks?"

It's a lie.

It's a myth.

You absolutely can, irrespective of age.

The brain does not stop being able to form new pathways.

In fact, it's fantastic.

It doesn't matter if a 40-year-old has spent a whole lifetime just getting on with it.

With the right support, they can learn to identify, name and work with their emotions.

Is it harder than learning it as a child?

Of course it is.

That's why we're here.

That's why the majority of our work is around teaching children emotional literacy and emotional intelligence, so they have those future-proofing skills for later life.

But that does not mean that, as parents of any age or as grandparents, we can't do it.

It's absolutely possible.

And the research shows something even more powerful.

When a parent learns emotional literacy alongside their child, when they are both developing new language for feelings at the same time, the relational impact is profound.

The child sees their parent struggling with the same thing they're struggling with.

They see that it's possible.

They see that they can learn.

They see that asking for help is what adults do when they don't know something.

And they feel less alone in it.

Siegel calls this earned security.

It's the process by which adults who did not experience secure attachment in childhood can develop the internal resources of securely attached people through reflection and reflective work.

You don't have to already have the words to give your child the words.

You just have to be willing to find them.

And together is better.

We've mentioned before the work of John Gottman, whose emotion coaching research I've referred to several times on this podcast.

He identified different types of parents in response to children's emotions.

At one end, we have the emotion-dismissing parent.

Not out of cruelty.

But because that's all they've ever been shown.

At the other end, we have the emotion-coaching parent.

The one who stops, names, validates, and helps the child problem-solve from a place of feeling understood.

The distance between those two is not talent.

It's not personality.

It's awareness and practice.

This parenting journey is not an easy one.

It's the hardest job in the world.

I've been doing my job for 30 years this year, and I would still say parenting is the hardest job, even when you've got all the tools in the toolkit.

Because it takes effort.

You have to put a shift in with these children.

But it does mean that this is available to anyone.

David was an emotion-dismissing parent because he had an emotion-dismissing childhood.

That was not his fault.

But what happened next was a choice.

So let's get into some top tips.

You know I always like to do this part of the podcast.

Learning the language you were never taught.

Here are five places to start for any parent who hears themselves in David's story.

And if you're listening to this, it might not be you.

It might be your partner.

Perhaps you've never understood why they don't parent in the same way.

Maybe they struggle with the emotional side of things.

Maybe they dismiss the children's feelings and you're trying to understand why.

Perhaps they think you're soft and you think they're hard.

And actually, there is a middle ground.

So let's start there.

1. Start with yourself, not the child

Before you can help your child name their feelings, you need to begin noticing your own.

At the end of each day, ask yourself three questions:

- What did I feel today?
- Where did I feel it in my body?
- What was happening when I felt it?

This isn't therapy.

It doesn't need to be that deep.

It's practice.

It's building the muscle.

Do that every evening.

2. Use feelings vocabulary literally

There are feeling wheels.

There are feeling charts designed for children that are just as useful for adults.

You can get posters.

In fact, I think we've got one ourselves.

If you send me an email, I'll send it to you for free.

Having emotions visible helps you recognise what you're trying to identify in yourself.

Put one on the fridge.

Then you might find yourself saying:

"I think I'm feeling frustrated today."

That's a complete sentence.

It doesn't have to be profound.

It just has to be honest.

Sometimes we think we're angry when actually we're frustrated.

The difference matters.

Having that vocabulary around you, where both you and your children can see it, can make a huge difference.

3. Name your own feelings out loud

Not to burden your children.

Not to overshare.

But to model.

For example:

"I'm feeling a little anxious about my meeting today."

"I noticed I was a bit irritable this morning. I think I was tired."

Simple.

Calm.

Ordinary.

When children hear parents naming feelings without drama, they learn that feelings are normal.

That feelings can be named.

That feelings are manageable.

And that is huge.

4. Repair the dismissals

You will get it wrong.

We all get it wrong.

There is no such thing as a perfect parent.

At some point you'll say:

"Calm down."

Or:

"You'll be fine."

When what was actually needed was something different.

When you notice you've done it—even hours later—go back.

It doesn't matter how much time has passed.

You can say:

"I told you to calm down earlier, and I don't think that helped."

"What were you actually feeling?"

That repair is often worth more than getting it right the first time.

5. Do it together

Be honest with your child, in an age-appropriate way, that you're learning this too.

You might say:

"I didn't really grow up talking about feelings, but I'd like us to get better at it together."

That honesty changes the dynamic completely.

You're no longer the expert standing above them dispensing wisdom.

You're two people figuring something out side by side.

And that's an incredibly powerful position to be in.

So let's go back to David.

I hope those were helpful.

David was not a man who found any of this easy.

And I want to be honest about that because I think it matters.

He didn't walk out of our first session in a state of euphoria where everything suddenly clicked.

He didn't walk out transformed.

He walked out uncomfortable.

A little embarrassed.

And genuinely unsure whether any of this was really for him.

But he came back.

Week after week, he came back.

And he put the work in.

There is a particular way things begin to shift when someone is doing genuine work on themselves.

Things started to change.

Not in Marcus at first.

In David.

He started noticing things.

He began noticing that on the drive to work he was tense.

And instead of turning up the radio and getting on with it, he started asking himself why.

Sometimes he knew.

Sometimes he didn't.

But the asking was new.

The asking was everything.

That was where the work was.

He got himself a feelings wheel.

He told me this with a slightly sheepish grin.

A big man with football stories and practical hands telling me he had downloaded a feelings wheel from the internet and put it on his phone.

He said:

"I felt a little bit like an idiot, but I've been using it."

I asked:

"And what did you feel this morning?"

He said:

"Apprehensive, I think. Probably about this."

I asked:

"And before, what would you have said?"

He laughed.

"Nothing. Fine. I would've said I was fine. I probably wouldn't even have come."

Around three months in, something happened that I want to tell you about.

Now, for me, three months is a little bit of a magic number.

It's when we often begin to see real shifts.

When we talk to parents, we usually recommend a minimum of 12 weeks.

Not because everybody needs it.

Sometimes things move much faster than that.

But twelve weeks, three months, is often where something starts to click into place.

And this was one of those moments.

Marcus came home from school angry.

He slammed his bag down.

Went straight to his room.

The usual pattern.

In the past, David would have done one of two things.

He would either have left him alone because that had always been his own strategy.

Or he would have gone in and tried to fix it because that's what he thought a good dad should do.

Both approaches usually made things worse.

This time, he did something different.

He knocked on the bedroom door.

He went in.

He sat on the end of the bed.

And for a moment, he said nothing at all.

Then he simply said:

"I don't know what's going on for you, but I can see something is. I'm here."

Marcus didn't answer immediately.

Then, after a little while, he said:

"I got dropped from the football team."

And David understood that.

He loved football.

He knew exactly what that felt like.

The humiliation.

The disappointment.

The embarrassment.

The loss.

For the first time, he had access to a whole emotional landscape that had always been there but had never previously had words attached to it.

And he said:

"You must be gutted."

"That's really gutting."

"I'm so sorry."

Not:

"It'll be fine."

Not:

"There'll be another chance."

Not:

"Don't worry about it."

Just recognition.

Just understanding.

Just naming the feeling.

Marcus looked at him as if he wasn't quite sure this was his dad.

Then his shoulders dropped.

That particular physical release you see when somebody has been holding onto something tightly and is finally given permission to put it down.

They sat together for 40 minutes.

Just talking.

David told me afterwards that it was the longest conversation he and Marcus had ever had that didn't involve football.

And he said:

"Do you know what? I didn't even know I had that in me."

And guess what?

He did.

He always had it in him.

He just didn't have the words.

So let's look at the bigger picture.

David and Marcus are not unusual.

The pattern I've described today—the parent who wasn't given the language and therefore couldn't pass it on to their child—is one of the most common things I see in this work.

And it cuts across every background.

Every social class.

Every culture.

It's everywhere.

The good news—and I genuinely mean this as good news—is that we're living in a moment of change.

There is a generation of parents right now who are actively and deliberately choosing to do things differently.

They're reading the books.

Listening to the podcasts.

Sitting in uncomfortable chairs in therapy offices.

Not because their childhoods were necessarily traumatic, but because they can see a gap between what they received and what they want to give their own children.

And they are closing that gap.

One named feeling at a time.

This is not small.

For me, this is huge.

When you understand the intergenerational research, it's revolutionary.

Because every parent who learns the language breaks a chain.

Every parent who says:

"I'm feeling anxious today,"

in front of their child gives that child a word they may carry for the rest of their life.

Every repair.

Every named feeling.

Every honest:

"I don't know how to do this, but I'm trying,"

travels forward into the next generation and the generation after that.

I often say that the work I do on myself isn't just for me.

It's for my children.

And their children.

You do not have to already have the words to give your child the words.

You simply have to be willing to start looking for them.

I want to end today with something David said to me during our final session together.

He'd been reflecting on the journey.

On where he had started and where he was now.

And he said:

"I used to think feelings were something you dealt with on your own."

"Something private."

"Something that, if you showed them, meant you couldn't cope."

"Now," he said, "I think feelings are just information."

"They're telling you something."

"And if you can hear what they're saying, you can actually do something useful."

Feelings are information.

That's all.

I've been saying that for years.

In therapy rooms.

In classrooms.

In training sessions.

In parent workshops.

For years.

But hearing it back from a man who arrived in my office unable to name a single emotion, and who left slowly, imperfectly and humanly able to sit beside his son and say:

"That must be gutting,"

and truly mean it—

that's the work.

That's why we do this.

So if you grew up without the words, you are not broken.

You are simply somebody who was not given something you deserved.

And it is absolutely, completely and scientifically supported to say:

It is not too late.

Start with the feelings wheel on your phone.

Start by noticing what you're feeling on the drive home from work.

Start with one honest sentence in front of your child.

That is enough.

That is the beginning.

And beginnings, in this work, are everything.

Thank you for being here for this one.

This episode, and the one before about Claire and Ellie and the anxiety that can travel through families without a single word being spoken, are two of the most important conversations I think we can have as parents and practitioners.

If you missed the other episode, go back and listen.

They sit beautifully together.

The show notes, feelings vocabulary resources and all the research references are in the notes below.

And if today's episode has stirred something in you, for yourself or for your child, please reach out.

We're here.

And we will meet you exactly where you are.

Until next time, keep finding the words.

And know that they matter more than you realise.