

What happened to raw emotions in childrens' songs?

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If you're sad and you know it, best not tell anyone. That's not an idea I'm down with, but I think it's the message well-meaning songsters are giving my kid.

Let me back up for a minute: In Ontario, the provincial government runs Early Years Centres, neighbourhood hang-out spots for parents and caregivers looking after children five years and younger. They're usually attached to a library, church, school or community centre, and are generally referred to as "drop-in centres," because that's what users of them do. We drop in whenever we need to, like when it's been raining for days and the toddler is climbing the walls, or when it's time to talk about something, anything, other than Elmo with someone, anyone, other than a baby.

Sometimes public nurses visit to answer questions, and every day there's a free, healthy snack for the kids. The staff is super sweet, and quick to watch over a little one so that you can pee unencumbered for once. Drop-ins are pretty much priceless, so I'm loathe to criticize them. But I can't get the song thing out of my head. Every day, each drop-in has a song circle. And what I've noticed is: emotions considered negative have been disappeared.

Take *The Wheels on the Bus*, for example. Even if you haven't hung out with a preschooler lately, you may remember the tune. The wheels go round and round, the doors go open and shut, and the driver says "move on back," all through the town. All of that is still the same, but now, the babies on the bus do not go "wah, wah, wah." Now, they say "la, la, la." As such, the parents have no need to say "ssh, ssh, ssh." Instead, they tell the happy babies "I love you."

Then there's *If You're Happy and You Know It*, which I alluded to before. These days, if you're angry and you know it, you definitely do not stomp your feet. Instead, you count to five. Which is kind of annoying but, okay, fine, that's likely a more productive anger management tool than stomping. At least you're still allowed to be angry. There's no replacement for "cry boo hoo" if you're sad and you know it. You just don't get to be sad at all – that verse isn't sung at my local drop-in centre. Once, when a mom tried to launch into it, she was quickly silenced by a staff member's brisk, brusque look.

As anyone who's spent a day with a person under five will tell you: babies and little kids cry. Sometimes they cry a lot. A quarter of newborn babies cry for 2.5 hours a day, apparently, which is something I learned after listening to the [Little Kids, Big Questions podcast](#) interview with Dr. Pamela High. A professor of pediatrics at Brown University, and director of the Rhode Island Hospital's Infant Cry, Behavior and Sleep Program, High says that parents find crying the most challenging behaviour after temper tantrums.

Children's crying is upsetting to listen to, she says, because we want to fix whatever is wrong. It's also irritating to listen to, because it has been biologically designed to get our attention and stir us to act. That's why we try to get it to stop as fast as we can, and when it doesn't, parents often feel angry, said High, and helpless. "I think there are many parents who have these feelings and feel very guilty about it," says High. Parents with especially fussy little ones have a higher risk of postpartum depression, which, ironically enough, is another one of those negative emotional experiences that we're often reluctant to talk about.

I'm not sure why the anti-sad song edict got handed down to the drop-ins. I'm sure the impulse was well-meaning, but I find it misguided. As much as I want my son to never feel sad, or angry, or scared, he's human. My job as a parent isn't to suppress his difficult feelings, but to help him learn how to cope with every emotion when it shows up.

Unpleasant emotions are inevitable and, dare I say, normal – "It's human nature," if I go back to High's words. And the ways we deal with them are normal, too. As far as I'm concerned, crying is definitely okay when you're sad, which is why we always sing that verse of the song at home. That, and my toddler finds it hilarious. He giggles like crazy every time he gets to the part of the song where he rubs his eyes and says "boo hoo."