

## **Transcript: Early Experiences Count: How Emotional Development Unfolds Starting at Birth Featuring Ross Thompson, Ph.D.**

Hello and welcome to ZERO TO THREE 's exciting new podcast series for parents: Little Kids, Big Questions, made possible with the generous support of MetLife Foundation. ZERO TO THREE is a national nonprofit organization devoted to the health and development of babies, toddlers and their families.

I'm Annie Pleshette Murphy, a ZERO TO THREE board member, and the host of this series, which will showcase interviews with leading child development experts on the issues most pressing to parents today, based on findings from a recent parent survey ZERO TO THREE conducted also with support from MetLife Foundation.

### **Ross:**

I am pleased to welcome Dr. Ross Thompson who will be joining us today to talk about the emotional life of young children. Ross is a professor of psychology at the University of California Davis and is on the Board of Directors at ZERO TO THREE. Ross, I think this is a confusing topic for a lot of parents. It's one thing when you hear a baby cry and you try to figure out whether it's a hungry cry or a tired cry. But I think when parents are told that an eight-month-old can experience feelings like sadness and anger, So let's start by talking about how we know that babies have these emotions.

A: Well, Annie, it—it really comes from careful observations and studies that researchers have done where they look very closely at babies' facial expressions, their—their vocal emotions, uh, as they're expressed in a cry, but also in lots of other ways, they've looked at how they, you know, respond in their behaviors and their reaction to other people and to—to other situations. Umm, it's easy for us to—to miss the rich emotional life of—of young babies, and, you know, in a sense parents have the same trouble trying to understand the mind of their infant, uh, as their infants are striving or struggling to understand what's going on in the minds of their parent.

Q: Right. Right. So, if we were talking about a baby, let's say, who was depressed at, umm, you know, ten months old, or, even younger than that, what as a clinician, what would you see if you—if a mother brought a baby to you and was worried? And—and what might she see if her baby were depressed?

A: Well, one of the things that is really apparent in—in infants and young children, umm, is their emotional vitality, is their emotional animation. Uh, indeed some of what can be, uh, at times daunting or frustrating to parents

is that young babies seem to be all emotion. Uh, they go from states of—uh, of great delight to, uh, either rage, to, uh, sad or petulant crying. Umm, they're—they're—they're anything if not—if not emotional in many respects.

Q: Right.

A: And—and one of the things that—that worries us a little bit but can be overlooked is when you see a child who is not showing that full range of vibrant emotions that you expect to see in a child of this age.

Q: Right.

A: And this can be a sign of the child's, umm, showing signs of depression. It is something we often see in—in infants and young children who themselves have a depressed parent. So, it—it's subdued. It's not showing a range of emotion. It's a child who, you know, is easily turned off to become withdrawn. Umm, and it's important to recognize that of course kids do vary temperamentally, umm, and not all kids are as emotional as others are. Umm, and so it's important not to over interpret, but I think when you see a child like this, uh, a wise parent might ask, "Is there something going on here."

Q: And—and actually one of the things you just touched on was, uh, that if a child has a parent who is depressed, that they are very sensitive to that. And in this research that we did, umm, the heart research that Zero To Three conducted, one of the interesting findings was that only about 44% of parents thought that a young child could begin to sense whether their parents were angry or sad, and could be affected by their moods, but obviously what you're saying is that that's really not so; that they are very sensitive to their parents.

A: Well, it really requires that we shift our mindset a little bit to understand that as much as we are striving as parents to remain sensitive to what's going on inside our infants and young children, that they too could also be extremely attentive to and sensitive to the feelings of the adults who they're attached to. And yet that's true. And if you watch closely what you find is that, umm, they are watching carefully the facial expressions, and the behavior of those who really matter in their lives. Umm, I have been watching a little girl who's been growing up with a mother who has problems with depression, and this child now at three and a half years is extremely solicitous of her mother's feelings. She's constantly attending

to what her mother is showing and how she's acting, and—and is very quick to ask, "Mommy, are you sad," because sadness has been such a regular part of her experience, and we have every reason to think that this begins, umm, very early in life.

And it's a reminder to us I think of—of how much the emotional life and the emotional world in which a baby is living is something they feed on. Umm, you know, we're accustomed to thinking of attending to a baby's physical needs, umm, and those are important. But it's very clear that emotion becomes part of the language of psychological development early on. And the emotional atmosphere that the baby feeds on in the early months and years of life become as an important influence on psychological development of the baby's own emotional development as does the nutrition of the baby's diet become that which the physical body grows with.

Q: Well, just so we don't make parents feel really guilty if they have a bad day, umm, I think the—you know, the other side of this is that children are incredibly resilient, and that the, umm, healing that can take place, if in fact, for example, a parent recognizes that she's suffering from postpartum depression, or she just is seriously depressed, uh, or if parents are having a hard time as a couple, that, although, yes, this might have an impact on a baby, that if she's able to get help, if she's able to get support, that the baby will, you know, bounce back, and that there's enormous healing that can happen relatively quickly.

Let's talk a little bit about some of the research findings. Thirty percent of the parents we surveyed thought that a child really, uh, can only experience these kinds of feelings, you know, when they're a little bit older, but certainly not at a—at a young age. Umm, and that—uh, the—the larger majority thought that this developmental milestone didn't really occur until—until a child was, maybe, you know, two, three years old. Why—why do you think this—this disconnect exists? You know, why do you think parents often underestimate the emotional sensitivity of their children? And—and I guess after you talk about that, Ross, just let's talk a little bit about why that could be problematic.

A: Sure. Okay. Well, you—you've got to be sympathetic with parents. Umm, you know, when—when researchers have talked with parents about their experience in taking care of a young baby, uh, what becomes clear is that they—they just experience the baby as a needy object of care. And why not? Umm, they're trying to keep up with, umm, the—the child's needs through feeding and changing and—and all the various things that go into, umm, addressing the needs of a—of a young baby. They're simply

trying to—to address the most obvious needs of their child. And their experience is also that the baby is living in their own world. Umm, they'll cry when she's hungry, or tired, or—or scared, umm, and—and basically, you know, expecting the world to—to—to take care of her. And so the idea that—that this child is not just a recipient of care, but is actually a person, umm, that there's actually an emerging personality here, and that the babies are wired for feelings. And that these are an early part of them. I think it's helpful for parents if they can start perceiving even their newborn infants as people because that is in fact what they are.

Q: I think the flipside of that of course is that the—you know, the other thing essent—especially as the kids get older, is that—umm, because they—they do see them as people, sometimes they may actually overestimate what they're capable of controlling. In other words, the other part of what we found was that, uh, there was, again, this kind of misunderstanding about, umm, you know, how much of their emotions children could control; that their ability to kind of self-regulate was—was not really, umm, what a lot of parents expected. 43% of parents thought that children could control their emotions by age three, and, uh, you know, 20% expected this by age two. Now, is that—is that a fair assumption? Or is an unrealistic expectation?

A: Well, unfortunately it's I think what parents wish was true, umm, but that it is not true, especially not true in light of what we know about—about brain development. Umm, the areas of the brain that help children control themselves, and help them manage their impulses, to regulate their feelings, to—to control their thinking, to focus their attention—all of these self-regulatory features of children's behavior, umm, depend on the area—on the areas of the brain are the slowest to mature. Uh, indeed, uh, these areas of the brain can be continuing to mature well through adolescence and early adulthood. So, infants and young children are really, if you'll excuse the expression, only at their baby steps in terms of—in terms of self control.

And indeed, you know, we all recognize that in lots of other areas of children's behavior. With respect to emotions, however, I think parents feel like children ought to be more self-controlling for lots of reasons. Uh, I mean, and one is that—is that simply when you are looking at a young child, a lot of their emotions are expressed in relation to their own, uh, desires and wants. Children becoming petulant at the supermarket when they can't get candy they desire, or, uh, becoming overly frustrated when, uh, something they're building refuses to—to stay built and collapses. Umm, and it's easy I think for parents to believe that—that children are in

some cases using their emotions strategically, umm, and that they have a lot more control over their emotional outbursts than they really do.

Q: Well, you certainly are right. That wishful thinking is there. You know, you really do want—when you say you to your two-year-old, “Would you be quiet now and just wait patiently in the line,” that you really wish they could.

If they seemed really reasonable and kind of—uh, and especially if a child has, you know, a—you know, a fair amount of language, I think this is—uh, certainly as a parent one of the big surprises for me was how much tougher the threes were than the twos, I mean, at the point at which my kids were able to say a lot and express a lot, and seemed very grown up. Umm, when they lost it, it was that much more confusing to me when I had been told that the terrible twos were named that because they were, you know, much less likely to be able to control their emotions.

A: No that’s true, but it’s also reflecting growth in children’s own sense of themselves that sometimes they become petulant because they are really willing to insist on—on what they want. But the problem is that children easily lose control, and initially, umm, in—in insisting on getting a desired snack a half hour before dinnertime, uh, what started off as a persistent request now explodes into a full-blown temper tantrum.

Q: Right.

A: And the child, you know, themselves may be as surprised as parents are that they have completely lost control. But the problem here is that—so, parents do expect that children ought to be able to manage their emotions by the ages of two or three, that it’s very easy for them to interpret these emotional outbursts as being willfully defiant.

Q: Right. That they’re manipulating me, or they’re doing it on purpose to drive me crazy.

A: They’re pushing my button.

Q: Right.

A: And—and that’s when parents can respond angrily. They can be very punitive, because of course they’re—they’re interpreting the child’s behavior as deliberately being uncooperative when the child may be, uh, as incapable of controlling their own feelings and expressions, uh, as—as

a parent is. And I think that when parents and others who work with young children understand that, then they realize that it is the adult who has to try to provide the self-control, that that child's brain is not yet mature enough to be able to do.

And here again I think one of the reasons that parents believe that young children ought to be more self controlling than they are is—is that every parent's experience, certainly mine was, that you—you often felt helpless yourself to be able to do anything to bring that child back to Earth once they have—once they have had a meltdown. And—and—and so, you know, if the child can't control it, you're---you're really—you're really kind of lost. And yet there are things that parents can do to help children manage their emotions, and—umm, and—and—and you really alluded to some of them, Annie. You know, we can—we can use words if children cannot to help children understand what they're feeling, to put into words why they're feeling, umm, to validate that, "You're so sad. You're so sad that you can't get that. I can see that." Umm, we can ourselves stay calm, because if the child is having the experience of flying off the handle, umm, then we can help give a calm focus of center, uh, that they can use then to help calm down. If—if the parent gets upset—if the parent begins getting emotional, uh, then you've got two people feeding off the downward spiral of each other.

The other thing, by the way, that we found helpful was, umm, if a child will be held, or even if they won't be, umm, to just do a lot of soothing touch—you know, repetitive rubbing of the back, umm, just to give the child, again, a calming influence. And, again, it's so hard when you're in the middle of a supermarket and you're worried what other people are thinking about your parenting to keep yourself calm during that time, that that is what the child can feed off of in trying to calm themselves down.

- Q: Right. I—I actually want—wanted to say one thing to parents who are listening to this about how important it is to support other parents in those situations.
- A: I think that's exactly right. And when we can show that we've all been there, we've all had this experience, that—that you are—you are no worse a parent because your child is having a meltdown. Then—then we're essentially helping the parent do—uh, do what they know is best with their child.
- Q: Right. One of the things you've worked a lot on is this idea of how a child does develop feelings of being good or bad about—about feeling, you know, good about themselves when you talk about self-esteem. Again,

going to this research, only about four out of ten parents thought that a child was capable of feeling, you know, good or bad about themselves when they were two. Umm, in fact, most parents didn't think that happened until they were quite a bit older. Is that in fact the right timing, or do children do have a sense of feeling good or bad about themselves sooner?

A: Well, I think one of the things that we've been surprised to learn is that children—they are developing a sense of themselves in a positive or negative sense very early on. I think one message that a—a child needs to—needs to receive is that they are loved unconditionally, umm, that they are a person of inestimable value, to their parents. Umm, we found that a healthy, warm, secure parent/child relationship is one of the most important predictors of positive self concept in preschoolers.

It's a child's effort, which children of course are looking to have recognized by their parents, uh, that can be rewarded, that can be praised, that—that can be, umm, uh, drawn attention to when a child, uh, tries really hard at solving a puzzle, or drawing a picture. Umm, and of course we know that—that children's earliest experiences of emotions like pride, and on the other hand, emotions like guilt and shame, are often coming from the reactions of parents to their behavior. Umm, and so, by about, you know, three years of age, uh, children will be holding up their drawings to get a parent's reaction, and their own sense of pride is built upon having a drawing that they have been laboring over, and having that drawing applauded by the adult. It contributes to their own sense of pride in their accomplishments.

Q: So, I think that the part of what you're touching on is, again, this often tough dance that parents have to do of—of, you know, when do you swoop in—uh, you know, this expression helicopter parenting where you're hovering around and swooping in as soon as a child gets frustrated, that—that it is important to stand back, that it is important to let a child kind of muscle through a very frustrating experience, because the payoff is big. I mean, they do have a sense of accomplishing something that, uh, you actually deny them if you make that block tower stand up straight, even though, umm, it probably was gonna come tumbling down.

A: Uh, that—that's very insightful, Annie. That is—that's right. Children need to have experiences in which they can develop their skills, in which they can have the experience of working hard and having things accomplished. Uh, they need to have the experience of developing the tools of self control that sometimes come through something you really, really want not being something that you can have.

And—and a parent who feeds to every child's request, who jumps in before frustration and problem-solving efforts can ensue, uh, a parent who gives children, uh, all that they want in an effort to ensure that they are perpetually happy, uh, you know, may be making actually the child's development of pride and their own accomplishments and efforts, and self control that much harder. Umm, I always thought that perhaps better than being a helicopter parent, who jumps in on every occasion—umm, you know, one needs to be an attentive parent, who they're having your child's back covered, but letting your child develop the pleasure and pride in mastering a lot of these developmental challenges, uh, on their own with you're being there if they really, really do need your help.

Q: So, you're saying something really important, which is this idea of, umm, really letting a child at times, experience a certain amount of frustration., Let's talk a little bit about what sometimes makes kids unhappy, umm, which is, you know, "It's time to go." We're at the playground. You're having a great time, but you've got to get home, and—umm, and, uh, little Ross, Jr. does not want to budge. What is a way that in the perfect world how would you advise a parent to handle that in a way that, you know, shows love—I mean, shows that you are understanding, but are still gonna get the kid into the stroller and home?

A: Well, this is a situation every parent's been in, so I can speak from experience. I think one thing that a parent can do in a situation like this is—is, first of all, let the child know in advance when it's going to be time to leave. Children have a lot of trouble with transitions, 'cause this is when self-regulation is required that they're not really good at. So, a parent would signal a couple of minutes before it's time to leave that we're going to have to begin picking up our things in just a couple of minutes, umm, can help get the—help the child get themselves ready for this. And in a situation like this, it's important for the parent to give the child the experience of learning to cope in a world where there are limitations to how much you can get everything that you want, and you have to be able to manage yourself, uh, when you're in those circumstances. So, a parent who—who can in this situation validate what the child is feeling: "I know you're so sad because you're having such a good time playing. It's so frustrating having to go when you don't want to. Umm, but at the same time making it clear that it is time to go. We can't stay any longer. Giving the child some choices about, "Do you want to get in the stroller before we go, or do you want to walk with me," umm, helping the child, in other words, have the tools to cope with this situation, umm, without feeling that the only answer that the parent can give is to give in, because then you have robbed the child of a chance to find ways of coping with disappointment.

I think another way of thinking is that more than ensuring that the child is happy all the time, a—an important goal for parents is helping to ensure that their child becomes competent, and sometimes competence arises from having to confront the things that frustrate you and make you unhappy and figuring out what to do in those circumstances. And the early childhood years are a time for doing that. And children can do that well, uh, when parents are there with them maintaining a calm presence in helping the child figuring out how to cope.

Q: Right. I—I think that's actually maybe a nice place to end is just to think that, you know, for parents who are struggling, that it's so critical that you take care of your own needs, that the—the main reason to do that is because you can't give if you don't have anything there to give if you're so drained.

A: And—and in the same way that as—as parents we give support to each other when a toddler is having a meltdown in a supermarket, umm, that—that—that mothers need to recognize that they aren't alone—aren't alone in the parenting process, and, uh, this is where fathers and partners, uh, and friends, and extended family members can have a wonderfully enabling role to play in helping those primary caregivers be the best kind of caregivers they can be.

Q: Yeah. Well, Ross, this was fantastic. Thank you so much for—

A: It's been my pleasure.

Q: ...all your insight. And, umm, I hope we'll talk again soon. Thanks again.

A: I look forward to that.

Q: Okay. Bye.