



## How Shared Negative Emotions Work

*Babies take on the emotions of their parents.* Babies cannot stay neutral. They often become overwhelmed by the negative emotions of others, especially of their parents. Strong negative emotions, such as anger, fear, or sadness, give children feelings of fear or shame. Babies will try to escape these feelings.

*Sharing negative emotions must be used sparingly to be effective.* Positive and negative emotions are processed differently in the nervous system, which in turn sends different chemicals to the brain. Extreme negative emotion stops learning and can slow development.

*Sharing negative emotions bring feelings of displeasure.* We feel alerted, and become cautious. We re-evaluate what we are doing. Because of this, giving negative signals can play a useful role for parents in alerting their babies to danger. It can signal when behaviors are unacceptable or unkind. Controlled negative emotions can establish rules of respect for others. Setting limits is one way that babies learn right from wrong. It is one way babies can feel protected or regulated by their parents, if they know that negative emotions are directed at their behavior and not at them.

*Shared negative emotions motivate us to eliminate the negative feelings.* The baby wants to withdraw from the people or things that cause them. However, when parents help babies understand what they do want, then learning occurs. When sharing a parent's emotions causes feelings of fear, anger, or sadness in the baby, he or she may become emotionally out of control. Learning then is side-tracked.

*If shared negative emotions happen too often in a relationship or are too strong,* they cause us to feel insecure, and to distrust the person or place where they happened. We may withdraw and quit learning or we begin to defend against them by attacking or destroying something. Sometimes when we feel helpless, we tend to save our bad feelings until we attack someone weaker than we are.

*When shared negative emotions happen too often in a relationship,* they cause both partners to feel rejected and devalued. This leads to feelings of shame and guilt, which are not deserved. These feelings damage self-confidence and can remain with a child for a lifetime.

*Negative emotions - used sparingly - are helpful. They regulate, teach, and define respect.*

*Negative emotions - used too often - are destructive to each person in the relationship.* It is crucial to the emotional health of the child that the parents learn how to minimize negative emotions, to control them, and to relieve them in others. Take a “Big Breath” and ask “Why?” before you say anything.