

You can't be happy all the time: How Encanto and Turning Red can help families wrestle with anger and sadness

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Credit: Disney/Pixar

In the film "Turning Red" (2022), a young 13-year-old girl, Meilin "Mei" Lee, turns into a red panda whenever she has strong emotions: when she is angry, when she is sad and when she is excited.

She begins to believe that strong emotions are embarrassing and tries to suppress her true self.

In the film "Encanto" (2021), the multi-generational Madrigal family keep their emotions from each other, causing their house to crumble.

As in "Inside Out" (2015) and "Frozen" (2013) before them, in these films the traditional animation villain is gone, and the "villain" becomes the character's emotions.

Only when the characters learn to embrace all of their feelings—and realize they aren't villains in our stories—can they become their true, authentic selves.

Emotions are important

A sense of self is the way a person thinks about their traits, their purpose and the beliefs that define their identity.

Developing a sense of self is vital not only for the developing child, but across the lifespan. A strong positive sense of self is integral for well-being.

An important part of this sense of self and living authentically is the ability to feel and express all of our emotions. Yet many parents, like Mei's mother Ming in "Turning Red," struggle to live authentically, often putting on a brave face and hiding their inner turmoil.

Suppressing our fears and self-doubts places us at greater risk for [chronic illness](#) and depression, whereas [opening up is good](#) for the body, mind and soul.

When parents don't demonstrate how to express and give voice to feelings, children are taught to suppress their distress. This restricts their ability to grow and [form safe and healthy attachments](#).

[Self-compassion](#) involves being kind to yourself and recognizing flaws are common to us all. In "Encanto," the sisters Mirabel, Isabela and Luisa all believe they need to suppress their emotions, and they judge themselves for having difficult feelings at all.

Self-compassion can shield against [negative emotions](#) when imagining distressing [social events](#). It has a greater buffering effect than [self-esteem](#), and can help us acknowledge our role in difficult events without being overwhelmed by negative emotions.

Strong emotions can be perceived as weaknesses, yet connecting to them with curiosity and self-compassion instead of judgment may hold the key to finding your identity.

Expressing emotions can lead to growth

These films intimately understand the importance of expressing and befriending our emotions, and how this leads to connection with others. Positive social connection produces [the love hormone oxytocin](#), releasing dopamine and decreasing anxiety.

As Mei in "Turning Red" connects with her friends and shares her true self, her feelings become less overwhelming.

When Encanto's Madrigal family learn they are allowed to express their fears with each other, the magic in the family grows.

These films provide opportunities for parents and children to talk about how we approach our emotions, and for parents to help their children move compassionately towards their difficulties—rather than away from them.

"Inside Out" can help us understand all emotions are normal and not to

be feared. The personified characters of Joy, Sadness, Fear, Anger and Disgust can help children learn to embrace uncomfortable emotions.

When children use emotions to guide how they are feeling, this gives them opportunities to grow.

Parenting with love

"[Parenting from the inside out](#)" is a psychological concept which means parents need to take care of their own emotional world in order to take care of their child's emotional world.

When parents have a deeper understanding of themselves, they can form stronger attachments with their children. It is also helpful when parents understand the [developmental brain changes](#) of children, how emotions shift and change as children grow, and how this can affect your experiences as a parent.

Understanding this can help you raise children who flourish. Helping children to name their emotions helps them tame the emotion.

Encouraging children is not always easy for [parents](#), especially if they did not grow up being encouraged themselves. Treating your children with [unconditional positive regard](#) means giving your children (and yourself) complete acceptance and love. This will set [children](#) up for success.

These recent films can be the perfect starting point for a conversation about those often unspeakably messy places to help your child fear less and grow more.

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