

# Putting Words to Feelings

## Verbalization of affects has a major effect on development.

By Paul C. Holinger

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In human development, who we are and what we become depend largely on affects, [cognition](#), and language—or feelings, thinking, and talking. These three systems are the foundation of some of the significant issues involving human beings today.

One issue of tremendous potential—yet often overlooked—is the early verbalization of emotions (putting words to feelings) and self-awareness.

### Putting Words to Feelings: “Verbalization of Affects”

Putting words to feelings may be one of the most important aspects of the affects-language-cognition interaction. It turns out that children can link words and feelings much earlier than thought—with tremendous benefits.

### A Walk in the Park

I was taking a walk one day and happened upon a little boy (about 3-4 years old) and his father. They were chatting with a woman who was walking a very small puppy and a larger dog who was the puppy’s mother. “Just look at that,” Dad said to his son, “Only a few months ago that little puppy was inside his mother’s tummy!” And his son said, “Uterus, Daddy, uterus!” Wow! Now, granted, it turned out that this little boy came from a medical family in which medical terms and anatomy were commonplace. But what a wonderful example of cognitive and verbal capacities. I later learned this little boy could readily express some synonyms for being excited. He would playfully say: “I am elated, exuberant, ecstatic!”

### Why Is Linking Words with Feelings So Important?

Because verbalizing feelings leads to tension-regulation, self-soothing, self-reflection. As Anny Katan (1961) said: “[V]erbalization leads to an integrating process... If the child would verbalize his feelings, he would learn to delay action (p. 185-6).

How does the child gain the capacities for tension-regulation and self-soothing? Both [nature](#) (“temperament”) and nurture (environment – i.e. the parents and caregivers) contribute. With respect to nurture, a calm and empathic [caregiver](#) is more likely to

impart these qualities to his/her child than a volatile and abrupt caregiver. Children tend to internalize and use the patterns provided by the parents. As psychoanalyst John Gedo noted (2005), many psychological problems are due to the child's internalizing the patterns of the parents – hence, the profound benefit of parents trying to “set a good example.”

Some parents intuitively understand feelings and how to respond. Some parents are able to label accurately the feelings involved, which helps even more. Confusion can ultimately occur in the child if the feelings are labelled inaccurately. Daniel Stern eloquently described language as a double-edged sword (1985): Language allows for shareability, but it also allows for different interpretations of words and misunderstandings. Much of psychopathology and clinical problems involve mislabeling and misunderstanding feelings, as we will see in the discussion of empathy.

In terms of neurobiology, it appears that the amygdala is the seat of feelings, and the verbalizing is accomplished by the cerebral cortex. Some describe [psychotherapy](#)—talking therapy—as enhancing the amygdala-cortex connections.

### **Feral Children**

Consider also feral children, who have very little human contact prior to [adolescence](#). The potential for language, particularly language that connects feelings and words, appears to begin to decrease in early adolescence. This is one reason feral children are so action-oriented, with their tensions unregulated. Not only have they not been socialized—i.e. they have not internalized ways of behaving in usual human interaction—but they have not had the advantage of the power of words as they relate to their visceral sensations.

### **Early Words**

One might argue that one cannot do much with words before children are about 1 1/2 to 3 years old, when they begin speaking. Yet children understand words long before they speak. In fact, as Vivona suggests, we need to rethink the idea of any “preverbal period.” The child is picking up tone of voice and words even before they are born. Children demonstrate the nine innate feelings immediately: the “primary affects” are manifested in facial expressions, vocalizations, and bodily movements. A knowledgeable parent can begin to label the feelings with words very soon after birth. Infants are much smarter than we used to think, so their cognitive capacities make the word-feeling linkages possible quite early.

In the long term, psychopathology can be decreased and positive aspects of character structure increased by utilizing the child's cognitive capacities to link words and feelings. The benefits are huge—namely, self-awareness: [understanding](#) their own internal world, elevating their behavioral [decision-making](#), and enhancing their interpersonal skills.

All the talking therapies ([psychoanalysis](#), psychotherapy, [cognitive behavioral therapy](#), and so on) utilize two major elements: the relationship with the therapist, and linking feelings, words, and cognitive capacities. This word-feeling connection has been shown to be very beneficial in clinical work with children and adults (Gedo, 2005; Tyson, 2010; Yanof, 1996; Holinger, 2015; Lieberman, 2007; Kircansky et al., 2012). This entire area—“how talking cures”—has received increasing attention recently as the role of early language becomes better understood (Vivona, 2014).

There is also an extensive literature in experimental psychology that tends to support the usefulness of putting words to feelings (i.e. interpretation of affect), particularly as a viable form of emotional regulation. Experimental studies have found that verbalization (spoken or written) of current emotional experience reduces distress in contrast to no verbalization, verbalization of nonaffective material, distraction, or reappraisal (Frattaroli, 2005; Kircansky et al, 2012; Pennebaker and Chung, 2011). In addition, neuroimaging studies suggest that affect labeling diminishes the response of the amygdala and enhances the activity of the cortex (Lieberman, et al, 2007).

The use of early words is not only helpful with emotional growth, but intellectual growth as well. Children of higher socioeconomic status hear and use more words than children of lower SES. This leads them to have a greater vocabulary, an advantage that persists over time regardless of educational intervention (Lowder et al, 2007).

Finally, many preventive and therapeutic programs have been shown to be effective with high-risk infants, children, and parents (e.g. Zeanah, 2000; Goodfriend, 1993; Gross et al. 1995; Olds et al., 1997, 1998). When examined closely, virtually all of these programs involve verbalization—especially of affect—as the essential component of their mutative effects (Holinger, 2000).

### **Empathy**

The use of feelings, words, and cognition is also of great value in validating the existence of the internal emotional world of other human beings. At stake here is the issue of empathic understanding of fellow humans. This is important in terms of [parenting](#), interpersonal skills, and clinical work.

I recall seeing a little girl coming into her daycare center with her mother. The little girl began to take off her sweater, saying “I’m feeling hot in here.” Her mother replied, “No you’re not...it’s not hot in here. Keep your sweater on.” The mother could not appreciate her daughter’s own inner world of her own feelings and sensations.

Peter Fonagy and Mary Target (1998) have done some wonderful clinical work that focuses on helping patients focus on the existence of another person’s internal world. This he calls “[mentalization](#).” It is related to the capacity for empathy (Basch, 1983). Many psychological problems are caused by lack of this ability, which seems to involve an early developmental arrest.

### **Interest (Curiosity)**

Of particular importance is the focus on the affect of interest (curiosity). We so often try to impose our own interests and standards on our children—we forget that what really matters in the long run is what they are interested in. It is allowing them to feel that validation of their interest—and unleashing their own curiosity—that will lead them to good choices in profession and [love](#). This linking of affect-language-cognition around the feeling of interest (curiosity) is hugely important. If the infant is intrigued with something—a pretty ribbon, a toy, and so on—the parent can say: “You are interested in that! You are excited! That’s great!”

This interaction provides five crucial functions.

1. It creates a shareability of feelings between parent and child, as Daniel Stern describes (1985).
2. It helps the parent realize that the child has his/her own internal world and feelings, and it helps the child understand that her parent “gets” her.
3. This interaction validates for the child the legitimacy of his/her feeling of interest.
4. This type of labeling and interaction begins to put words, symbols, to this feeling. The child is then better able to understand and define his/her own feelings of interest and communicate them.
5. This interaction leads to greater focus on the content of items and issues that intrigue the child. Ultimately, this enhances the capacity to choose a profession, love, and avocations. This is consistent with Winnicott’s notion of True (authentic) and False Self (1960).

The overall benefit involves increasing the curiosity and learning and exploratory activities, and decreasing the inhibition of such activities.

### **Summary**

What is striking about the integration of feelings-language-cognition and putting words to feelings is how early one can start. The benefits are enormous with respect to the character structure of the individual. These include increased tension-regulation and self-soothing; increase sense for the child of their own internal world and the feelings which motivate their behaviors; an increased sense on the part of the parents for what “makes their child click,” i.e. that their child has his/her own feelings and inner life that need to be recognized; increased and more accurate communication between child and the external world, leading to greater interpersonal skills; and an overall sense that the parents listen to the child’s interests while at the same time they help to [socialize](#) the child.

([www.psychologytoday.com](http://www.psychologytoday.com))

**SELEÇÃO DE MESTRADO E DOUTORADO EM LINGUÍSTICA –  
TURMA 2019**

**EXAME DE PROFICIÊNCIA EM LÍNGUA INGLESA**

CANDIDATO(A) No: \_\_\_\_\_

**ATENÇÃO!**

1. As respostas deverão ser dadas em **português e não devem ser uma tradução literal do texto.**
2. As respostas deverão ater-se exclusivamente ao texto e ao que está sendo perguntado.
3. O limite de espaço para cada resposta é de meia página.
4. As respostas deverão ser escritas à tinta.
5. É facultado o uso de dicionários bilíngues e/ou monolíngues, que não poderão ser compartilhados entre os candidatos.
6. O tempo de duração da prova é de 3 (três) horas.

Leia o texto “*Putting words to feelings*”, de autoria de Paul C. Holinger, extraído de [www.psychologytoday.com](http://www.psychologytoday.com) e responda as questões a seguir:

1. Qual é o tema discutido pelo autor do texto? (1)

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2. Descreva o caso relatado ("A walk in the park") e discuta em que medida ele ilustra o argumento apresentado pelo autor do texto. (3)

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3. Como o texto caracteriza "feral children"? (1,5)

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4. Com base nas diferentes áreas de pesquisa abordadas na seção “Early words”, preencha o quadro a seguir: (3)

Área de pesquisa	Resumo dos achados científicos

5. Resuma os benefícios da interação entre empatia e curiosidade na relação parental. (1,5)

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EXME DE PROFICIÊNCIA EM LÍNGUA INGLESA

1. Qual é o tema discutido pelo autor do texto? (1)

Sugestão de resposta: O texto aborda a interação ou integração entre o afeto, a cognição e o uso da língua na verbalização de sentimentos no processo de desenvolvimento humano.

2. Descreva o caso relatado (“A walk in the park”) e discuta em que medida ele ilustra o argumento defendido pelo autor do texto. (3)

Sugestão de resposta: O caso relatado envolve pai e filho em um passeio no parque, quando observam uma mulher que passeia com seus cães – mãe e filhote. Ao mencionar o estágio de desenvolvimento anterior do filhote, o pai refere-se a “tummy” (“barriga”), ao que o filho rapidamente retruca “útero, papai, útero”. Tal capacidade expressiva (“word to feeling”) pode ser explicada pela interação da criança com sua família, que atua na área médica, sendo tais termos médicos frequentemente utilizados. Assim, o caso descrito evidencia a interrelação da capacidade cognitiva da criança em expressar sentimentos ao mesmo tempo em que aciona conceitos internalizados da sua experiência na vocalização de uma determinada situação.

3. Como o autor do texto caracteriza “feral children”?(1,5)

Sugestão de resposta: Segundo o texto, são crianças que tiveram pouco contato humano anterior à adolescência, sendo mais orientadas à ação e menos capazes de regular suas tensões. Por terem sido privadas de socialização, isto é, não terem internalizado comportamentos humanos padronizados de interação, não são capazes de expressar verbalmente determinadas emoções ou sensações.

4. Com base na diferentes áreas de pesquisa abordadas na seção “Early words”, preencha o quadro a seguir: (3)

Sugestão de resposta: A pergunta se detém na área de pesquisa e no resumo/síntese dos achados científicos:

Terapias conversacionais (Psicanálise, Psicoterapia, Terapia Cognitiva Comportamental): conexão entre palavras e sentimentos como benéficas no trabalho terapêutico com crianças e adultos;

Psicologia experimental/Estudos experimentais: verbalização (oral ou escrita) de experiências emocionais como fator que contribui para a redução de estresse em contraste com nenhuma verbalização, distração ou reforço;

Estudos em Neuroimagem: denominação de afetos ou sentimentos diminui a resposta da amígdala e estimula a atividade do córtex cerebral.



5. **Resuma os benefícios da interação entre empatia e curiosidade na relação parental: (1,5)**

**Sugestão de resposta:** Segundo o autor do texto, tal interação favorece o compartilhamento de sentimentos entre pai e filho; contribui para a compreensão do mundo interno da criança e de seus sentimentos por parte do familiar, fazendo-a perceber que é entendida; legitima os interesses da criança; favorece a conexão entre palavras, símbolos e sentimentos, que auxilia na definição de interesses e na forma de comunicá-los, estimulando, em última instância, a capacidade de fazer escolhas futuras.