

Yawn game

In families, when one member feels sad, angry or worried, other members can “catch” that feeling, which can result in unhelpful responses and further escalation of emotions. This is a brief game to play with families or subsets of families to help family members realize that feelings can be contagious and identify how this occurs within their own family.

MATERIALS

We tend to plan ahead for this activity; however, no materials are required.

PROCEDURE

Begin by giving an exaggerated yawn and watching what happens. Point out if anyone yawned in response to your yawn and anyone who yawned in response to their yawn.

Talk about how yawning can be catchy and ask the family whether they have noticed other feelings that sometimes catch in their family. Ask questions about who is most prone to catching the feelings of others, whether there is anyone who can stop the pattern and the like.

Talk about how positive feelings can be catchy too and ask about whether anyone thinks they could set up a contagious laugh or smile. Ask them to do so in the session and reflect on what happens.

FOR PARENTS

Parents often respond to their child’s feelings in kind. Highlighting this tendency and helping them to find alternative ways to respond can be particularly helpful in supporting them to better support their children.

DEVELOPMENTAL CONSIDERATIONS

Both younger and older children will enjoy playing this game and should be able to understand at a simple level that people can catch the feelings of others. Younger children will find it hard to think about how this relates to their experiences within the family, though some older children may be able to do so. It is parents who we ask to take responsibility for this, though, and it is with parents that we focus our discussion around how this occurs at home and what can be done to alter this.

EXTENSION

Ask about any times lately when family members have caught a feeling or nominate someone to be on “contagious feeling watch.” You could give a child a whistle to blow or similar when they notice feelings becoming catching. Even if children don’t follow through

with this at home, often an activity like this heightens the family's awareness and can lead to some behavioral changes.

Some parents will be interested to know, and more likely to take on these ideas, if you share with them that the contagious nature of feelings seems to be supported by neuroscientific evidence relating to mirror neurons (brain cells which fire when we observe other people's emotions, influencing our own emotions). Siegel and Bryson (2012) provide a simple explanation of this.