

INSIGHTS

Developing your child's emotional intelligence



Everything old is new again.

Over 2,000 years ago Socrates reminded his Greek compatriots, “Educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all.” Socrates was talking about the development of what we now call emotional intelligence.

Current day muse Dr. Marc Brackett director of the Yale Centre for Emotional Intelligence is more expansive. He says, “Emotions matter as they drive learning, decision-making, creativity, relationships, and health.”

Emotions are messy. They can be loud. They can be hidden. They so often interrupt our well-organised schedules. “What do you mean you’re sad? We’re off to watch a movie. It’s a happy time!” Emotions are hard to control and difficult to see. Like slippery eels swimming in a dam, you know that they are down there somewhere but it’s hard to figure just what they are doing.

So where do we start exploring the alien landscape, the new frontier of parenting? Here are five ideas to help you explore the alien landscape of kids’ emotions, the new frontier of parenting:

1. View emotions through the pleasantness lens.

We often place value judgements on emotions by saying some emotions are good or positive (happy, motivated, energised) while some are bad or negative (sad, worried, sullen). Avoid passing judgement in such ways. Recognise that emotions are pleasant or unpleasant and that all emotions are acceptable, whereas some behaviours (such as hurting someone when you are angry) are unacceptable.

2. Set your antennae to pick up emotion.

Ever have a child come home from school and misbehave in a way that is out of character? If so, did you focus on the behaviour or did you try to detect the emotion behind the behaviour? The default mechanism for many adults is to respond to children’s behaviour rather than stand back and take notice of what may be going on beneath the surface. We respond to aggressive behaviour and sometimes fail to notice the anger seething below. Stop automatically reacting to behaviour and start noticing the emotion that may be driving the behaviour. You still need to manage poor behaviour but responding in this way may give you a valuable insight into your child’s inner world.

3. Validate kids’ emotions.

Children and teenagers who are upset or experience extreme emotions require to understanding and validation. You don’t necessarily have to necessarily fix the situation, but it is important that your child knows that understand he is upset. Convey your empathy with statements such as, “Ahh, I see your upset that your brother...” ; “ Yes, it’s understandable to be annoyed.....”; and “I can see that you are angry about this...”



4. Help your kids recognise, then regulate emotions.

Kids, like adults, need to recognise their feelings before they can regulate their emotional state. Emotional recognition is a complex process that takes practice. Learning to recognise your feelings is a continuous process that's best started when young, before the ups and downs of adolescence becomes a reality. Cue kids to their emotions by reflecting back to them how they maybe feeling rather than shutting them down or ignoring them. E.g. "It seems that pretty angry right now. Could I be right?"

5. Build your child's vocabulary of feeling words.

Emotionally smart kids generally have a wide vocabulary, which means they are better placed to shift their moods when required. Reflect back as accurately as possible how your child or young person may be feeling. The differences between emotions such as anxious, tense, nervous, worried and overwrought maybe small but they are important in terms of giving kids some wiggle room to shift their feelings.

Emotional intelligence is best learned when it becomes part of your family's culture, or way of doing things. Impacting on family culture is the best way of creating inter-generational change. You'll know you've had generational impact when your children as adults identify you as the person who trained them in the skills of emotional intelligence. How cool would that be!



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