



Fostering Emotional Intelligence in Young Children

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Instead of asking “How smart are you?” about a child, a much better question to ask would be “How are you smart?” Intelligence comes in different varieties, from athletic competence to musical expression, and people are smart in different ways. Among these different forms of intelligence is one that is very important to a child’s happiness and life success – **emotional intelligence.**

What is Emotional Intelligence?

When dealing with our awareness and use of emotions, being “heart smart” helps. If you are concerned about health, you normally might think of being “heart smart” as taking care of your heart by eating right and exercising regularly. However, a person can be “heart smart” in a different sense. It relates to what we call emotional intelligence. Some research suggests social and emotional intelligence is distinct from academic ability, and it also is a key part of what makes people do well in the practicalities and relationships of life. What exactly is emotional intelligence?

Emotional intelligence has been defined as a “type of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one’s own and others’ emotions, to discriminate among them and to use the information to guide one’s thinking and actions.” Emotional intelligence also is referred to as “EI” or “EQ.” Specifically, emotional intelligence concerns the awareness of our own and others’ feelings, their influence on us and how to manage emotions in positive and meaningful ways.

Emotional intelligence relates to how we recognize, understand and choose how we feel, think or act. “EQ” affects a child’s capacity to relate to others, interact and communicate, and also his or her ability to express feelings ranging from love to anger to trust. Recent work in the area of emotional intelligence has led to a broad view that suggests it contributes in important ways to success in life.

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Thinking About Emotional Intelligence

Awareness of your own feelings and a child’s emotional responses can help assess aspects of emotional intelligence. This learning activity shares questions related to feelings. Check your own emotional responses as a parent for each question (“Never” to “Always”). Then consider a particular child and check emotional responses for that child, too. This is not a scientific evaluation, but it can help you think about areas of emotional intelligence to focus on for yourself or a particular child.

		Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Usually	Often
1. Aware of subtle feelings as they are felt or experienced. <i>(emotional awareness)</i>	Parent					
	Child					
2. Uses feelings to help make big decisions in life. <i>(feelings and motivation)</i>	Parent					
	Child					
3. Bad moods are overwhelming. <i>(managing feelings of distress)</i>	Parent					
	Child					
4. When angry, blows top or fumes in silence. <i>(managing anger)</i>	Parent					
	Child					
5. Can delay gratification in pursuit of goals instead of being carried away by impulses. <i>(controlling emotional impulses)</i>	Parent					
	Child					
6. Instead of giving up in the face of setbacks or disappointments, remains hopeful and optimistic. <i>(maintaining positive emotions)</i>	Parent					
	Child					
7. Able to sense what others feel without them having to say it. <i>(awareness of others’ feelings)</i>	Parent					
	Child					
8. Have trouble handling conflict and emotional upsets in relationships. <i>(emotion and relationships)</i>	Parent					
	Child					
9. Feel compassionate toward others who have trouble based on a sense of their feelings. <i>(empathy for others)</i>	Parent					
	Child					
10. Can soothe or contain distressing feelings so they don’t become a distraction to other things. <i>(managing feelings of distress)</i>	Parent					
	Child					

Raising Emotionally Intelligent Children

The area of emotional intelligence has at least five critical domains or competencies. These are the abilities we can promote with young children, even in their very early years. Five primary competencies of emotional intelligence are:

- **Awareness of your own emotions**
- **Managing your own emotions**
- **Motivating oneself**
- **Empathy for others**
- **Handling relationships**

Parents and caregivers can facilitate the development of these competencies as they interact with young children and provide models for them to follow.

1. Awareness of Your Own Emotions

Personal awareness relates to knowing your own emotions, or observing yourself and recognizing feelings as they arise. Young children do not automatically understand their feelings. They can benefit from guidance in learning about their feelings. Some ideas to consider:

- **Express your feelings with words that indicate or identify feelings.** Adults can model awareness of feelings by explaining that they “feel sad” or “feel angry.” This helps children learn everyone has emotions and a variety of feelings are normal. Also, tell children you can “feel upset” but show them how you can guide the expression of those feelings positively.

- **Be aware of children’s emotions and tune into what they are experiencing to prompt various feelings.** Watch children for changes of facial expression, physical cues (turning away, putting head down, etc.), tone of voice or other things that identify a child’s feelings. Help them identify the “message” of their emotions and tune in to the experiences around them that might be causing certain feelings, such as frustration or happiness.
- **Help children verbally label their emotions so their awareness expands.** Children may feel uncertain or uncomfortable when they have strong feelings, and labeling a feeling (“scared,” “excited”) helps them talk about it and makes it more normal. Realize that young children have limited “word labels” for feelings (mad, sad, happy), so make sure they understand a word’s meaning. Also, they may feel a variety of emotions, and talking can help them label what they really are feeling. Make a connection for them between a behavior (look on their face, wanting a hug) and what they are feeling (e.g., “I think you might feel upset because your voice is really loud”). Finally, **suggest feelings they might have** (“You sound pretty angry” or “You seem excited.”) and **not what they should or must feel** (“Stop being mad.” or “You don’t really feel scared.”).

- **Discover the emotions children are feeling through trying to understand the reasons for their emotions.** Children have reasons for the emotions they feel, and exploring the reasons for what they feel and how they express those feelings in their behavior can help. Also, you can explore feelings and their origin through regular play, pretend play or interactive games and activities.
- **Listen with empathy and validate the feelings children express.** Children wonder how others will react to their expression of feelings. Listen attentively to children’s feelings, watch for physical cues of emotion, and get down on their eye level. Repeat what they said to be sure you understand what they feel and they know you understand. Help children recognize that feeling a strong reaction is OK, then provide guidance on how to positively respond if needed.

2. Managing Your Own Emotions

Managing your own emotions involves handling your feelings so they are expressed in ways that allow you to handle fears, anxieties, anger, sadness or other emotions in a constructive manner. Managing emotions is a critical skill that is important to living in a healthy manner, accomplishing goals and relating to others. Some ideas to consider:

- **Recognize children’s efforts to manage feelings of distress and give support in soothing them.** Even very

young children, such as infants, will try to manage emotional distress by crying for a response, sucking a thumb or pacifier, or avoiding what bothers them. Parents and others should recognize such efforts and give children kindness, support and love to soothe troubled feelings. Also, give them words to express how they are feeling. Children who experience positive, caring responses to their emotional distress will develop trust and confidence in themselves and others.

- **Build a close relationship with children through games, conversation and activities so they trust you when they need help in managing emotions.** Children need to know who they can turn to when emotions are building. Talk and listen, spend time in play, read together or do other fun activities. These activities help build trust. Also, children can receive daily input on managing emotions as you spend time together and they know they can turn to you when they feel troubled.

- **Model positive responses to managing emotions that children can learn to follow.** When you feel angry, sad or upset, take time to slow down and manage your feelings in positive ways. Explain to children how you feel and what you are doing to manage your emotions (take a walk to calm down, think about being kind before responding, listen to calm music, etc.). Children will learn much about managing emotions from your example.
- **Assist children to soothe themselves when emotions become troubled and teach them ahead of time what they can do to handle their emotions.** Before children get too distressed, they need you to pay attention, give them reassurance and words, and calm them down. Also, you can talk ahead of time about what to do when feeling upset or angry, and suggest ways to handle emotions, such as counting to 10 before speaking, asking for someone to listen or walking away. Planning ahead how to handle an emotional situation can ease difficulties in managing emotions under stress.

- **Together with your children, read children's books or watch children's shows that give ideas on how to handle emotions or stressful situations.** Children's literature or television shows, puppet shows or other resources that model situations in life (divorce, sleeping over, first day of school, etc.) can share ideas on how to handle feelings or situations. Use these resources to explore possible feelings and effective responses to a variety of situations. Ask the child open-ended questions about how he or she would feel in a situation or what he or she would do.
- **Provide children with alternatives to poor behavior in managing emotions and give guidance on what to do instead.** Set limits on children's behavior and how they may express feelings that are inappropriate (hitting, yelling at others, etc.), being aware that children at younger ages do not yet have the ability to control some emotional impulses. Think of alternatives to teach children and assist them in coming up with different or better solutions to a problem in how they managed feelings. Brainstorm ideas and practice how they might respond the next time feelings become distressed. For example, a basic rule could be: You cannot hurt others, yourself or your toys (things).

Help children recognize that feeling a strong reaction is OK, then provide guidance on how to positively respond if needed.

3. Motivating Oneself

Motivating oneself with feelings involves directing your emotions toward accomplishing goals and guiding one's feelings as needed to overcome obstacles or concerns. For example, you might feel lonely, so you learn to use that feeling to focus on developing some friendships with others. Some ideas to consider:

- **Guide children to consider how they feel and how to achieve what they want in an appropriate way when feeling a desire, interest or passion.** Feelings motivate us to want something (a new toy) or respond in a certain way (feelings of anger toward someone who insulted us). Encourage children to identify how they feel, what that feeling pushes them to do or achieve, and how to manage that response appropriately. This may mean using the emotion to pursue a response (use desire for a new toy to seek ideas on how to get it with parent support) or, at times, to limit a response (feel a desire to yell at someone but choose instead to speak kindly or walk away).
- **Let children know that having a variety of feelings is OK and they also can choose how to respond to those feelings.** Children can learn they do not need to be trapped by their emotions, but they can choose a response. For example, a child may feel discouraged after not doing well on an exam, and feeling sad is OK,

but then they can choose to work toward getting a better grade or do something with a parent to feel better. For young children, let them know specifically what to do to respond to a feeling and choose a particular action or attitude.

- **Share in and support the interests and hopes of children in pursuing goals and dreams.** Children learn their strong interests or dreams can lead to positive things when caring adults support them. Provide caring, constructive support and feedback to children as they feel motivated to pursue particular ideas, dreams or goals.
- **Give children choices from a young age over small things, such as the color of a shirt to wear or what toy to play with, and be affirming of their choices.** Empowering children by giving them choices and then respecting those choices is important. Children who are allowed to make choices regularly learn to trust their own feelings and use those feelings in making decisions about what they want to do. However, be careful about giving a choice when no choice is involved.

4. Empathy for Others

Empathy for others relates to being sensitive to others' feelings and perspectives, and understanding others' feelings and experiences. For young children, empathy is an ability that develops through time as they interact with others. Some ideas to consider:

- **Help young children be aware of and identify feelings in other people, such as on TV, in movies, in books or in the community.** Parents and other adults can help young children notice and identify a person's expression of feelings. For example, while watching a television show, you might indicate, "The little girl in that show seems very happy (or frustrated, etc.)." Help children learn to be aware of cues to feelings, such as facial expressions, tone of voice and body language. Reading books that highlight emotional responses of other children to a situation (visiting the doctor, sleeping over, having a birthday party, someone breaking their toy, etc.) together with your children can be helpful in teaching how others feel and how to be sensitive to those feelings.
- **Use literature, art, music and other mediums to introduce children to different expressions of feeling.** Listen to different pieces of music and ask children how the music makes them feel, or how it might make others feel. Look at a piece of art and ask what the child thinks the person who painted it felt. Ask a child to draw a picture of how he or she feels when happy or sad, or a picture of how someone else might feel when feeling various emotions.
- **Give sensitivity and respect to the emotions a child expresses.** Children are much more likely to develop

empathy for others when such empathy is expressed toward them. Do not dismiss feelings. Instead, acknowledge them and give sensitivity and respect to a child's feelings while also helping them manage and express those feelings. This will help children follow an example of how to express empathy for others.

- **Be understanding and compassionate toward children's experiences.** Children are prone to tears and temper tantrums, and dealing with these expressions of feeling constantly can become frustrating for adults. However, parents and other adults can be responsive to a child's experiences while also setting guidelines on how to respond to such situations.
- **Teach understanding, respect and compassion toward others.** Children learn from observing and being involved in direct experiences with others. In their interactions with others, take time to teach being respectful, taking turns, sharing and being inclusive. Also, remember that these interaction skills develop through time and your expectations need to be age-appropriate. Examples and experience with being caring and responsive toward others, such as responding to a younger sibling's cries or hurt feelings, can help children develop empathy for others.

5. Handling Relationships

Managing your own emotions and responding to others' emotions are key aspects of handling human relationships. Handling relationships as a skill is centered on being able to handle expression of emotion in others, and on social awareness and interaction skills. Some ideas to consider:

- **Focus on helping children build secure, healthy attachments with caring parents and adults.** Children benefit most when parents and other adults are sensitive to their needs, responsive to their signals for assistance, and warm and supportive in their interactions. These patterns help children develop the trust and security they need to form healthy human relationships.
- **Let children know ahead of time what actions you might take so you can ease their concerns and highlight the value of communication.** Parents and other adults need to model communication that takes into account another's concerns or feelings. Let children know if you will leave a room and when you will be back, or where they can find you if they need help for something. The practice

of clear communication in this concrete way helps children learn its benefits in interacting with others.

- **Recognize expressions of emotion as an opportunity for intimacy and teaching.** Use opportunities when someone expresses emotion to help children realize this is a time for emotional connection and support. Use such times to give comfort, share laughter or exchange expressions of affection with a child. Creating moments of intimacy and support when someone expresses emotion helps children learn how to be similar in their other relationships.
- **Be active in play and interactive activities with children so you can provide guidance on social interaction.** Children who may struggle with handling relationships often can learn by interactions with an adult who can help guide social interactions with other children. As you interact with children, show them how to ask questions, enter a group, play in a cooperative manner, be kind, take turns and do other things that are important in handling relationships.

Give sensitivity and respect to a child's feelings while also helping them manage and express those feelings

Recommended Children's Books About Feelings

Reading not only can enrich the lives of our children, it provides caring and time for intimacy with children. Take time to talk about the characters, situations, problems and feelings described in a book and how those characters solved concerns.

Below you will find a listing of books that address emotions, such as anger, sadness and fear.

Infant/Toddler

Feelings by Aliko Brandenburg (Scholastic, 1984)

I Feel by George Ancona (E.P. Dutton, 1977)

Clifford series by Norman Bridwell (Scholastic)

Franklin is Bossy by Paulette Bourgeois (Scholastic)

Let's Talk About Feeling Angry and other *Let's Talk About* books by Joy Berry (Scholastic, 1995 and other years)

Glad Monster, Sad Monster by Ed Emberley (Scholastic, 1995)

Going to the Potty by Red Rogers (Putnam, 1986)

Holes and Peeks by Ann Jonas (Greenwillow, 1984)

The Runaway Bunny by Margaret Wise Brown (Harper & Row, 1972)

Early Childhood

When Sophie Gets Angry by Molly Bang (Scholastic, 1999)

The Berenstain Bears series by Stan and Jan Berenstain (Random House)

The Selfish Crocodile by Faustin Charles (Scholastic, 2000)

The Way I Feel by Janan Cain (Scholastic, 2001)

Harry and the Terrible Whatzit by Dick Gackenbach (Clarion, 1978)

Sheila Rae, the Brave by Kevin Henkes (Scholastic, 1987)

Wemberly Worried by Kevin Henkes (Scholastic, 2000)

Little Critter series by Gina and Mercer Mayer (Scholastic)

Dinofours series by Steve Metzger (Scholastic)

Love You Forever by Robert Munsch (Firefly, 1986)

Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day by Judith Viorst (Atheneum, 1972)

Ira Sleeps Over by Bernard Waber (Houghton Mifflin, 1972)

Positive Emotional Outcomes

Parents and other caregivers can facilitate the development of emotional competencies as they interact with young children and provide models for them to follow. You first need to realize what you already are doing to assist children with these competencies, and then think about and pursue other strategies as well.

As young children grow, parents can practice "emotional coaching" in which they help children understand what they are feeling and suggest strategies for handling their emotions. Such emotional coaching is a key pattern in helping young children learn emotional intelligence. Parental practices discussed above represent emotional coaching and help children understand their own and others' emotions.

Do not forget about the use of art, music, nature and other avenues to create awareness of feelings in young children. Use books to teach about emotions, empathy and making decisions. Emotions make up so much of a person's world, and especially for young children. The role of feelings is important in shaping the way they understand themselves and relate to others. So, give your child a head start by helping him or her become "heart smart" by fostering emotional intelligence.

Recommended Resources

■ Books and Articles

Freedman, J., Rideout, M.C., Jensen, A.L. and Freedman, P. (1997/98). *Handle with Care: Emotional Intelligence Activity Book*. San Mateo, Calif.: Six Seconds Publications.

This is an excellent resource for ideas and activities that can be used to promote emotional intelligence in young children.

Goleman, D. (1995). *Emotional Intelligence*. New York: Bantam Books.

This book brought the topic of emotional intelligence to widespread public attention. This and other books by this author are useful introductions to the topic.

Gottman, J. (1997). *Raising Emotionally Intelligent Children*. New York: Fireside.

This is an excellent resource by a well-recognized scholar on parenting children to maximize their potential and emotional intelligence.

McCown, K.S., Jensen, A.L., Freedman, J.M. and Rideout, M.C. (1998). *Self Science: The Emotional Intelligence Curriculum*. San Mateo, Calif.: Six Seconds Publications.

This is a useful curriculum and resource designed for use in school and other setting. It's full of activities and ideas related to emotional intelligence.

Shapiro, L.E. (1997). *How to Raise a Child with a High EQ: A Parent's Guide to Emotional Intelligence*. New York: HarperPerennial.

This is an accessible and user-friendly book on raising children to be emotionally intelligent.

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