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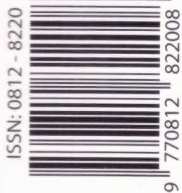
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Raising emotionally intelligent kids

Would you prefer to have a child who lacks confidence, social skills, motivation or the ability to express their feelings — but is brilliant academically? Or would you prefer a child who might not excel academically but can show empathy, kindness, problem-solving ability and confidence? We look at how to raise kids with high Emotional Intelligence (EQ).

Words SONIA ZADRO

At primary school, Rick has lots of friends and is involved in lots of clubs. He listens, shows empathy for others and tries to help when he can so that others will trust him.

His younger sister Emma, however, is quiet and creative and has only a few close friends. But she's also a good listener and easy to talk to. She shares her feelings a little and uses music and art to express them. Both Rick and Emma have high emotional intelligence (EQ). They are connected to their feelings,

manage and express them in helpful ways and understand and have empathy for others' feelings.

Jasper is in Rick's class. Like Rick he's extroverted, he knows everyone, loves to be centre of attention and is always telling people how he feels. However, Jasper is aggressive and demanding. He has few close friends and doesn't cope when others disagree with him. He also doesn't care or notice how others respond to his outbursts.

Sally is Emma's friend and is introverted like Emma. She focuses on facts and

bottles up her feelings. She loves science and maths, but hates being in groups and never asks for help. Most people feel they don't understand Sally as she rarely expresses herself. Sally and Jasper both have a lower EQ.

What is EQ?

While IQ, the Intelligence Quotient, measures how well you can adapt to culture on intellectual measures such as general knowledge, spatial and verbal reasoning and memory, Emotional



When you show empathy children learn they matter, are lovable and worthy, and that their feelings matter.

Intelligence or EQ refers to how well you can adapt to your culture at an emotional level. In a child, this means being able to identify emotions in themselves and others and responding to these feelings in constructive ways. Even if a child can perceive another's feelings, they might still ignore them or continue to say something hurtful. Or they might be able to identify their own feelings but not know how to process or manage them. A high EQ means a child understands what's causing their feelings and they use this to respond appropriately in ways that make themselves feel better and ways that don't hurt others. They can also help others manage their feelings better.

The impact of a high EQ

Although Jasper and Sally might have a high IQ, they are less likely to succeed in life because of their lower EQ. Many studies support this trend. A 19-year study from the *American Journal of Public Health* found that a child's social and emotional skills in kindergarten predicted later success. Children who were able to share, cooperate and follow direction at age five were more likely to obtain college degrees and to begin working in full-time jobs by age 25.

Another large longitudinal study cited in *Psychology Today* of 450 boys observed over 40 years found that IQ had little relation to life success. The best predictors were being able to get along with others, handle frustration and control emotions. In other words, high EQ.

As one might expect, children with high EQ are found to build better relationships because they can better manage conflict, develop deeper friendships in which feelings can be shared and can better manage conflict because they can manage their own and others' feelings. Because they can process and manage their feelings and develop deeper friendships, they are also less likely to develop mental health issues.

How to help your kids

Label your child's emotions

Children need to develop a vocabulary so they can recognise and express their feelings. When your child frowns and tells you that no one played with him at school, you might say "You seem really sad about that." If they stamp their foot after losing a game you could say, "You sound pretty angry that you didn't win." Labelling their feelings builds their feeling vocabulary and validates them.



How do you parent?

John Gottman in *Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child* outlines four parenting styles as follows. You might find you draw from one or more styles at different times.

~ The dismissing parent

Here, the parent treats the child's feelings as unimportant or trivial and either ignores them, distracts them or makes light of them and shows little interest in them. They see the child's emotions as irrational or toxic and think focusing on them will make them worse. They downplay the events leading to the feelings and think the child is demanding that they fix things when they may just want to be soothed.

~ The disapproving parent

This parent is like the dismissing parent but more exaggerated. They criticise the child, reprimand or punish the child for emotional expression even when they aren't misbehaving, believe they should limit the time of emotional expression or control it. They believe the child only expresses feelings to manipulate and that emotions make people weak.

With the above two styles, the child learns their feelings are wrong or invalid and that there is something inherently wrong within themselves for having feelings. They may internalise the belief "I'm bad" or "I don't matter". They also don't learn how to regulate their feelings.

~ The laissez-faire parent

All emotional expression is accepted from this parent and the child is comforted, but little guidance is offered and no limits are set. The child also isn't taught how to solve problems, as such parents tend to believe that there is little you can do about negative feelings except ride them out. Here, the child doesn't learn how to regulate their feelings; because of this they may have trouble concentrating and getting along with others.

~ The emotion coach

This parent views the child's negative feelings as an opportunity for intimacy — to bond with and teach the child. They listen to the child and are sensitive to their feelings even if they are subtle. They empathise with and label the child's emotion, then offer guidance on how to regulate their feelings. They can also set limits and teach acceptable ways to express their feelings that don't hurt others. Finally, they teach problem-solving. The power comes from the bond with the child rather than aggression or control. Here, the child learns that they and their feelings matter. They trust their feelings, regulate them and solve problems. They have good self-esteem and relate well to others. But how do you develop this bond? The ideas presented here are a good place to start.



Try and give love without conditions — and give extra praise for when you notice kids “trying their best” at something.

Show empathy

When you show empathy, you take labelling feelings one step further and show your child you understand how it might feel to stand in their shoes. When done well it usually has the effect of soothing and settling another's emotions. When someone is empathic towards you, you feel truly understood and heard. You may even understand yourself and your situation better.

So, again, when your child frowns and tells you that no one played with him at school, try saying, “You seem sad about that. It's really hard sometimes when you're learning to make friends. You can feel all alone.”

And again, when they stamp their feet having lost a game, try saying, “You sound so angry. It can be really frustrating when you lose, can't it?”

When you show empathy children learn they matter, are lovable and worthy and that their feelings matter. These messages are priceless and are the basis of a healthy self-confidence. It also helps a child bond with you. When a child feels bonded they are more likely to respond to what you ask of them.

Model appropriate ways to express feelings

When your child starts throwing their toys around the room and screaming, firmly but gently ask them to stop. Ask them to tell you why they are feeling angry or frustrated. If they can't label their feelings give them some suggestions. “Are you feeling angry because you are bored and want to play a different game? Are you hungry or tired?” Then empathise. “It's frustrating when you get bored of a game. But instead of screaming come and tell me how you feel or what you need.” If your child is little and can't yet talk, remember

that appropriate touch is powerful. Holding, stroking their arm, or hugging them while you say something soothing can often help.

Teach healthy coping skills

Once your child can label their feelings, they need to learn how to deal with them. Your child might be encouraged to draw or paint intense feelings, talk to you about them, write — if they can — about them, or kick or hit a ball outside if they are really angry. It's important you allow your child to have their feelings, but it's also important they learn to calm themselves down.

Belly breathing is a really good skill to teach them when they are scared or angry. Tell them to very gently and very slowly breathe into their belly and watch it rise up like a balloon, then as they breathe out tell them to let the air out of their balloon. Have them do this very gently for at least five, gentle, slow breaths. This calms their nervous system and turns off the fight (the angry) and flight (the anxious) responses.

Colouring-in books, joke books or soothing music or lotions may also help. You can put items that help in a container which they then can go to when they are upset.

Develop problem-solving skills

Part of building emotional intelligence involves learning how to solve a problem when necessary. After feelings have been labelled and understood, it's time to try and fix the problem.

Perhaps your child is angry that his sister keeps interrupting him while he's playing a video game. Help him identify at least five ways he might solve this problem. Don't take over and rescue him as it's good for the child to learn to do this himself. Solutions don't have to be good ideas. Initially, the goal is to just brainstorm ideas and allow him to make mistakes. Then help

him assess the pros and cons of each and encourage him to pick the best option.

When your child makes mistakes, work through what could have been done differently. Tell them mistakes are normal and a part of learning and growing. Work on helping your child see that they have the ability to solve problems on their own.

Own your mistakes

We all make mistakes as parents. We lose our temper sometimes, we might swear occasionally, or behave in a way we are not proud of. It's important to own this when it happens and apologise. If your child is hurt from your poor behaviour and you don't apologise, they will feel this injustice and lose trust in you. When you own your mistakes, you are also teaching them that mistakes are normal and not shameful. Remember the more you are aware of your own issues the less chance you have of putting them out on your children.

Love them

It seems so obvious but it's important to reflect on how you show your child you love them. Do you tell them? Hug them? Praise them? Do you praise only when they are really successful at something, or look especially beautiful? In the latter, they might get the message they are only lovable and acceptable when they meet certain standards. Try to give love without conditions — and extra praise for when you notice them “trying their best” at something. This motivates them to do their best regardless of the outcome. Unconditional love fosters a child who can love themselves and others unconditionally. 🍌

Sonia Zadro is a clinical psychologist with 20 years of experience and a freelance writer. She is interested in helping people heal and opening minds through science. To find out more, visit soniazadro.com.