



Developing Emotional INTELLIGENCE

Emotions impact on every part of a child's life – learning, behavior, health and relationships, so its little wonder that when a child cannot manage their emotions well, parents become very concerned, writes psychologist **Jutta Dempsey**.



Recent research has revealed that tantrum-throwing toddlers who hit, kick, bite or break objects at the age of two or three are seven times more likely than other kids to be suffering a psychiatric disorder.

And they are five times more likely to suffer depression or anxiety at primary school.

The research, based on interviews with more than 5000 parents of toddlers over a decade, has found a link between violent tantrums and anxiety disorders, Attention Deficit Disorder, depression and Oppositional Defiance Disorder.

This research endorses parental concern when a child is unable to manage their emotions.

Children who are emotionally competent, manage their own feelings well and recognise and respond effectively to the feelings of others, are at an advantage in everyday life, whether in family, peers, sports or learning environments. They are also more likely to lead happy and productive lives and to master the habits of mind, such as time management and organisational skills that will assure them personal success.

Children who can tolerate frustration and stress better, who get into fewer fights and engage in less self-destructive behavior, are less lonely, more focused and less impulsive.

In order to teach children how to handle their emotions parents must obviously have a reasonable degree of emotional intelligence themselves. Rage in an adult is disturbing to watch, but even more so for a child witnessing it in the car or watching their parents fight.

[1] The first step in getting children to learn how to control their emotional responses is to help them develop self-awareness. They need to know what they are feeling, be able to put it into words and be able to identify negative events that hijack their good feelings. If children lack self-awareness, they may become engulfed by their feelings, lost in them and overwhelmed by them.

[2] Children then need to know how to manage their emotions and recover from upsets, distress and bad moods quickly. Anger, sadness and worry are all stressful feelings that a child can learn to manage as follows:

• **ANGER:** Contrary to some theories "letting it all out" is not helpful. Acting on anger will generally make a child angrier, and each angry outburst will prolong and deepen the distress,

especially when outbursts mount on top of one another. When we're flooded with negative emotions our ability to hear, think and speak are severely impaired so taking a 'time out' can be enormously constructive. Reframing a situation, or seeing it from a different perspective, is one of the most effective ways of quelling and controlling emotions.

• **SADNESS:** The key to lifting ourselves out of low feelings is exercise and positive distracting activities, like seeing a funny movie, improving a skill, winning a game or completing a project. Humor is great at lifting a child out of these low moods and can add to their creativity and ability to solve problems.

• **STRESS:** Coping well with stressful situations builds resilience and motivation in children. Rather intervening on their behalf, allow your children to problem solve and cope by themselves because this will develop their independence and ability to handle stress well.

[3] Having clearly articulated goals and steps to successful completion is an important part of emotional development. Children need to motivate themselves toward a goal and marshal emotions in order to reach those goals, gratifying and stifling impulsiveness.

[4] Empathy and the ability to recognise emotions in others is an outgrowth of self-awareness. You can encourage this by getting your children to understand different perspectives. For instance, in conflict situations children can be asked to listen to each other's feelings and point of view and then feed back and summarise the opposing perspective.

[5] Children learn many core skills through their many diverse relationships with other people including empathy, listening, understanding body language and managing other people's emotions.

Every day children have countless opportunities to learn the skills of emotional intelligence through their relationships with others. When emotional lessons are repeated over and over and role modeled as well, they are reflected in strengthening neural pathways in the brain and they become positive habits that surface in times of stress.

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