

Emotional Intelligence For Parents

If we want our children to grow up successful, happy and with a confident and healthy mental well-being, then we must take responsibility to listen and understand:

- how their evolving brains work,
- how we influence their early beliefs, and
- how we enable their emotional intelligence.

Part One starts by introducing you to the term 'Emotional Intelligence', as defined by Daniel Goleman in his book entitled 'Emotional Intelligence, 1995'. It is about learning how to be in control of one's emotions. Research shows that Emotional Intelligence (EQ) is a big factor in achieving happiness and success in life.

Part two outlines how your child's brain evolves over time and offers the following steps to teach your child emotional intelligence:

- Because children learn from us by copying, the first step is to be a role model on how to manage your emotions
- Next, keep your judgements of your child in perspective, that is be their listener and educator and not their judge and jury.
- Encourage your child to explore their emotional experience by helping them to talk through an upsetting experience and think about strategies for handling their feelings.

The two parts stand alone, so you can choose which part you read first.

PART ONE - Emotional Intelligence (EQ)

Daniel Goleman is the author of a book called 'Emotional Intelligence' 1995. He proposed 'Emotional Intelligence' as a far more valuable measure of someone's ability to lead than the traditional IQ measurement.

I began to understand this theory when I realised it meant 'being in control of my emotions'. An example of not using my emotional intelligence might be: 'when someone angers me, I shout back at them and punish them'. If I were to use my Emotional Intelligence then I might: 'at the first sign of anger, control my emotion until I understood the situation better, and then make a more informed response'.

According to research, people who can do this make good managers and leaders. Try the following question for yourself:

"Who is more likely to be successful at managing you, someone who shouts and criticises you when they are under stress, or someone who is in control and calmly assesses your situation?"

I assume you would choose the latter, as they were obviously in more control of themselves and the situation – this is the sign of Emotional Intelligence.

Research shows that Emotional Intelligence (EQ) is a big factor in achieving happiness and success in life. It has more to contribute to building strong relationships, successful careers than Intellectual Intelligence (IQ), even though the latter has been used for many decades as a measure of suitability for a job.

If our goal as parents is to bring up happy and successful children who are capable of building successful relationships then it must be our priority to teach them the essential skill of using their emotional intelligence.

What does it mean to have emotional intelligence?

It starts with recognising and controlling our impulsive feelings and behaviours. It also means we are capable of paying attention to others' emotional states from the cues they give us. This understanding enables us to relate better, whether that be at work, at home or almost anywhere we come into contact with other human beings.

How do we learn Emotional Intelligence?

Probably the most common way for children to learn emotional intelligence is through their role models - that's us! But what if we haven't learnt how to use our emotional intelligence? Then they are unlikely to learn it in their early years, with us as their significant role models.

They will of course have other role models in their lives, such as teachers, friends and pop idols from whom they may learn this essential skill, but that is leaving it too much to chance.

There is plenty of literature on the subject of Emotional Intelligence, so maybe we should take the initiative and learn it for ourselves. This way our children can benefit from copying it from us and we can teach them.

One of our challenges is controlling how we respond to another's feelings. Often we feel threatened by them and respond with our own emotional-related behaviour, and that is how wars start! There are many 'mini-wars' breaking out all over the world, in our offices, our homes, local bars and restaurants.

Learning to control our emotions is the most effective change agent ever discovered, and yes it may mean we need to confront our greatest fear – the pain of the original trauma that caused this blemish in our personality.

Part Two - Teaching children Emotional Intelligence

How children make use of their brains in their early years

In the beginning, children learn by copying the people around them. It does not mean they understand what they are copying, but their innate curiosity drives them to learn about the world they now inhabit.

At around the age of 2 years when our child's limbic brain becomes active, they now have the capability to learn by experiencing the world through emotions. They are now able to make connections in their brain that become their beliefs - things they believe to be true. They now have the facility to make judgements about themselves and the world they inhabit.

In their early years, they learn most of their beliefs from their parents, people they trust and believe. It was Milton Rokeach who got me thinking about this when he wrote...

“No person is personally able to ascertain the truth of all such things for him/herself. So, he/she believes in this or that authority, parents, teachers, religious leaders, scientists. And, he/she is often willing to take some authority's word for many things.” (Rokeach)

This is how many of my beliefs as a child were formed. I took on my father's (my authority figure) version of the truth without question. From then on, my life was controlled by the beliefs my father had imparted to me - whether well-informed or misguided.

As an authoritative figure in our child's life, we must recognise how much we inform our child's early beliefs. Our challenge is to recognise when we misinform or misguide our children in ways which will become issues later in their adult life.

By the time they are seven or eight, they are beginning to experience their third brain - the cortex. Now they can make sense of their experiences using meaning and logic, but they have a challenge. Most of their understanding so far is based on beliefs formed in their limbic brain period and are therefore very emotionally-connected.

This is where we, as parents, must get to grips with helping our children to make effective use of both their emotional brain and thinking brain by teaching them emotional intelligence - this is about listening to them as they express their emotion and then helping to make sense of their emotions and how to manage them in a more productive way.

An important message for us as parents is to be aware of the judgements we make and communicate to our children at a vulnerable age when they take whatever we tell them as the truth. It is this vulnerable age of 2 to 8 years that they rely on us for the judgements they make, and how they manage their emotions.

Helping your child learn emotional intelligence

The **first lesson** in teaching our children to manage their emotions is to be a good role model of managing our own emotions. And remember, they learn by copying!

Do you remember an advert, where a mum was smoking standing at the open door to the kitchen, blowing the smoke out into the garden? It was an example of how much our culture has changed. In this example, 'we no longer smoke in our houses'.

Then the camera zoomed back and into view came the back of a child sitting at the kitchen table doing homework. In her hand was a pencil with which she mimicked the smoking of a cigarette in synchronisation with her mum at the door.

The moral of this advert is whoever we are and whatever we do, our children will see it and copy it, as the story in the advert demonstrated. I am sure you are already aware that they copy all our behaviours - both good and bad.

The **second lesson** is keep your judgements of them and their behaviour in perspective. What do I mean? We may be mistakenly judging their behaviour as bad or naughty, when actually they need to learn something. So rather than being their judge and jury, shift to being their listener and educator.

In a recent conversation about parenting with a grandmother, she said to me, "Parents don't have the time to do what you are talking about, and what's more important, they do not want to feel that bad about themselves." I replied, "You are right about the importance of not feeling bad about ourselves."

As working parents, there will be times when we will feel bad about our parenting, or even worse if someone criticises our parenting. It is not easy to take, especially when we feel we are doing our best and we have given our 'all' to our children, and yet they are not living up to our expectations.

My guess is we are too quick to blame. Whether it's our children we blame for misbehaving or ourselves for not being a 'good parent', neither is helpful. A friend of mine said this to me once:

“There is no such thing as naughty”

Try saying this phrase to yourself when you are about to scold your 'naughty' child, and see how it changes your approach. I know how it changes me, I see them as making a mistake, and I immediately take a different approach towards them. It works with everyone, not just children, because we all make mistakes, and a different response makes all the difference.

Whether we make mistakes or not, for certain we want our children to have a good life, a successful future, and help them to achieve that. It therefore makes sense to focus on what needs to change, and less on how bad we might feel because we or our children make mistakes. We will achieve more if we focus on the solution and not get trapped in the game of blame and feeling bad.

As parents, we make choices which impact our children every day, and as we do, we cannot avoid making mistakes. It is how we respond to mistakes, that matters. If we can learn from mistakes then we have an opportunity to try a new approach - and role-model learning from making mistakes.

The **third lesson** is to help your child to explore their emotional experience. Help them move from venting their emotional upset to understanding what is causing it and why.

How do we do that?

It starts by listening. We listen to them without judging, giving advice or giving them solutions. When they stop talking, we feed back what we heard, both the emotion and the reason for their emotion, for example: “I can see you get very angry when you are not treated fairly.”

Next check it out with them by asking, “is that right?” They will either agree with us or say we are wrong. If it is the latter, then ask them to correct it.

They are now beginning to think about their experience rather than just regurgitating it. By learning to talk about their emotion, rather than just re-playing it, they are beginning to use their emotional intelligence.

As they continue to delve into their experience, you can start to lead them into thinking about strategies for handling their feelings next time with questions like:

“What might you do next time you feel unfairly treated?”

“How will that help you?”

“What about the person that treated you unfairly?”

“What might they have been feeling at the time?”

“How might you help someone else who was treated unfairly like you?”

Questions like the above are not only to help them explore feelings, whether their own or someone else's, but also to come up with strategies for handling themselves and others in similar situations.

One thing to notice about the questions above is the unspoken assumption that they can work it out for themselves, which can be very challenging to us when we feel desperate to save them.

In summary, teaching your child emotional intelligence requires you to:

- Be a role model for how to manage your emotions
- Keep your judgements of your child in perspective
- Encourage your child to explore their emotional experience
- Help your child think about strategies for handling their and other's feelings.

In summary

If we want our children to grow up successful, happy and with a confident and healthy mental well-being, then we must take responsibility to listen and understand:

- how their evolving brains work,
- how we influence their early beliefs, and
- how we enable their emotional intelligence

With the above, we are better placed to assist our child to grow into happy, healthy and effective adults. They will make more progress when we make the assumption that they can find their way through how their minds work.

At this early stage, any misinformed or misguided beliefs are easily accessible and very visible when you listen to understand. If they are not identified and re-assessed at this early stage, then they will become buried under decades of new experiences, and that makes identification and re-assessment that much more difficult in later life.

Best we catch them at the early stage.

Mike O'Sullivan 2021