

WHY SHOULD PARENTS CATER FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE IN THEIR CHILDREN?

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Abstract

The autor discusses the definition of emotional intelligence, its importance for the development of children and the learning process and outlines some advises for parents who want to raise emotionally intelligent children.

Key words

emotional intelligence, development, learning

Each of us, parents, wants to have an intelligent child who will be able to get the most of their brains – whether it is to think more creatively, solve problems more efficiently, recall information more quickly or learn new things more easily. In other words, we are all anxious for our children’s intelligence to develop quickly and well. Expectant parents are encouraged to read and play music to the fetus in order to stimulate its brain as being intelligent is synonymous with being successful in life. But is it really so? Is intelligence a real predictor of our success in future life? For decades, a lot of emphasis has been put on certain aspects of intelligence such as logical reasoning, math skills, spatial skills, understanding analogies, verbal skills etc. Researchers were puzzled by the fact that while IQ could predict to a significant degree academic performance and, to some degree, professional and personal success, there was something missing in this finding. Some of those with fabulous IQ scores were doing poorly in life; one could say that they were wasting their potential by thinking, behaving and communicating in the way that hindered their chances to succeed. One of the major missing parts in the finding is emotional intelligence.

The notion of emotional intelligence

Emotional intelligence is a topic that has attracted a considerable amount of attention recently and has been promoted both by psychiatrists and as a panacea for all our problems. There are half a million web pages on “emotional intelligence,” and everyone wants to claim the “right” definition.

So what exactly is meant by emotional intelligence?

There is not one universal and unified definition of emotional intelligence that could explain and clarify this notion. According to the proponents of the concept of emotional intelligence: John Mayer and Peter Salovey (1998) this type of intelligence refers to: “the capacity to reason about emotions, and of emotions to enhance thinking. It includes the abilities to accurately perceive emotions, to access and generate emotions so as to assist thought, to understand emotions and emotional knowledge, and to reflectively regulate emotions so as to promote emotional and intellectual growth”¹.

In order to give a more comprehensive picture of the term they further defined four critical areas of the theory. These were:

- 1) identification of emotions, that is the ability to recognize how you and those around you are feeling;
- 2) using emotions, which in turn, refers to the ability to generate an emotion, and then reason with this emotion;
- 3) understanding emotions, connected with one’s ability to understand complex emotions, and how emotions transition from one stage to another; and finally
- 4) managing emotions, concerned with the ability that allows one to manage their emotions².

Daniel Goleman (1998), however, introduced the model that sees Emotional Intelligence as: “a wide array of competencies and skills that drive leadership performance”. Goleman’s model is based on four main factors responsible for creating the IE:

1. “self-awareness – the ability to read one’s emotions and recognize their impact while using gut feelings to guide decisions,
2. self-management – involves controlling one’s emotions and impulses and adapting to changing circumstances,
3. social awareness – the ability to sense, understand, and react to others’ emotions while comprehending social networks,
4. relationship management – the ability to inspire, influence, and develop others while managing conflict³.

According to Goleman (1998) emotional competences are not innate properties. They refer to learned skills that a person achieves through hard work. Yet,

¹ Mayer, J. D., Caruso, D. R., & Salovey, P. (1998) Emotional intelligence meets traditional standards for an intelligence. *Intelligence*, 27, 267-298.

² Emotional Intelligence Informational website , Homepage of Emotional Intelligence

³ Goleman, D. (1998). *Working with emotional intelligence*. New York: Bantam Books

the author states that individuals are born with a general emotional intelligence that determines their potential for learning those emotional competencies.

In defining the term we should not omit the third acknowledged model of EI suggested by Bar-On (1997) who states that: “emotional intelligence is an array of noncognitive capabilities, competencies, and skills that influence one’s ability to succeed in coping with environmental demands and pressures”. It is the real-world results that the definition focuses on. As Bar-On holds that “emotionally intelligent people are able to effectively manage personal, social and environmental change by realistically and flexibly coping with the immediate situation and solving problems of an interpersonal nature. To do this, they need to manage emotions effectively and be sufficiently optimistic, positive and self-motivated” (Bar-On, 2007)⁴.

What role does an emotional intelligence play in our lives?

All the three definitions presented above, although different in details, stress the significant and positive effects of emotional development on people’s lives and success. Emotional development relates to how we recognize, understand and choose how we feel, think or act. It shapes our understanding of ourselves (self) and also our interactions with others (family and friends, groups, communities). It often defines how and what we learn, as well as what we put priority to in our daily lives. Our feelings provide us with internal energy and are involved with almost every decision we make. They also help us gather, organize, prioritize, recall and process information which is essential to both health and happiness.

Additionally, high degree of emotional intelligence can help us deal with dangerous and threatening situations. The better emotional memory and recall a person has, the more likely they will be able to quickly spot a similar danger in the future by processing the many cues they are receiving on an emotional level.

Emotional people react faster to others’ needs. These are emotional sensitivity and emotional intelligence that make them take a helpful action. What is traditionally understood as conscience is also very closely related to emotional intelligence. When a child begins life with a higher level of emotional intelligence which is later developed in healthy ways, then their conscience is strong and healthy. With a healthy conscience we can make decisions for ourselves without unnecessary rules or external authority figures.

⁴ <http://www.reuvenbaron.org/>

Developing a child's emotional intelligence also teaches the child to tolerate and respect others' feelings and individuality as not everyone is the same or feels the same. Children become more understanding that we all are different; that we each have different needs, desires and preferences.

When developed in a healthy manner, our natural emotional intelligence can help raise responsible children. Children's ability to control thoughts and feelings as well as their ability to respond to them is the highest form of personal responsibility.⁵

All in all, as emotions play an important role in our daily lives we should promote and enhance them from a very young age. Young children who are emotionally stable, that is, have their emotions under control seem to:

- have more friends,
- better control their behavior,
- have a positive self-esteem, the development of which "contributes to the physical condition of relaxed alertness which optimizes learning". (M. Berman, 1998),
- be more attentive and open to learning what makes them be good learners,
- be more independent in decision making and experience less peer pressure,
- tolerant and understanding towards others,
- are more empathetic⁶.

All these lead to long-term happiness and success in life as children grow older.

How do emotions influence our learning?

'All learning has an emotional base' as Plato said. This means that there is some kind of interplay between our emotions and intellect. Emotions are formed in our brain in the limbic system. This small structure located in the middle of the brain between the lower center or brainstem and the higher center or cortex system plays a very important role in our brain. The limbic system interprets sensory information and sends it to the cortex for processing. If the limbic system interprets the information as positive, it sends a message of purpose and excitement and directs our behavior toward a goal. When this happens, we become motivated to act; thinking and learning are enhanced. When the interpretation is negative, the switch is turned off and thinking and learning

⁵ J. Gottman (1998). *The heart of parenting . Raising an emotionally intelligent child.* Fireside. Simon and Schuster. NY.

⁶ Gottman, J. (1998). *The heart of parenting . Raising an emotionally intelligent child.* Fireside. Simon and Schuster. NY

are stifled. The more positive the learner's memories and reaction to the event (emotional state), the better the learning will be. Research has shown that the state of happiness has a positive effect on learning, memory and social behavior as the feeling of happiness unblocks brain passages. On the contrary, negative emotional states, such as anger and sadness, are said to have a negative impact on learning and motivation. As M. Berman (1998) points out when a negative emotion (stress) accompanies learning the chances for us to learn minimize. It is simply biologically impossible to learn as our receptivity is disturbed. A human being who is under the stress becomes resistant to anything new.

How can parents bring up a child with a high degree of emotional intelligence?

From the very beginning of infancy, parents can help build emotional abilities in children as they grow and develop physical, verbal and social abilities. Young children have an enormous capacity for learning. The early years provide a valuable opportunity to help children learn about emotions and relationships with others. Caring adults are most important in helping a young child to develop emotionally. Some of the best ways to develop emotional intelligence in young children include modelling and creating awareness of their emotions. Mark Brandenburg⁷ suggests "Top Ten Ways to Raise Emotionally Intelligent Kids" which when followed daily can give our kids the best chance possible to be happy, productive and responsible adults.

Top Ten Ways to Raise Emotionally Intelligent Kids

1. Model emotional intelligence yourself. Children are good observers and watch their parents very closely. They see when parents are frustrated and how they respond to frustration, they see whether they are aware of their own feelings and the feelings of others. If you have problems with managing your own emotions your child will mirror your behaviours as well.

2. Don't be afraid to say "no" to your children. All loving parents will do almost everything to satisfy their children's needs. Being aware of this your child will demand a lot. But you can not always say "yes". Sometimes you have to say "no" as saying "no" will give your child an opportunity to deal with disappointment and to learn impulse control. To a certain degree, your job as a parent is to allow your children to be frustrated and to work through it. Children who always get what they want typically are not very happy.

⁷ <http://www.naturalfamilyonline.com/5-ap/46-emotional-intelligence.htm>

3. Create an emotionally safe and supportive environment. Discuss feelings openly. Avoid shouting, violent words or actions. Encourage children to be emotionally honest through acceptance and unconditional love.

4. Try not to judge your children's behaviour. Parents who use judgment and control create feelings of: fear, resentment, powerlessness, anger, defensiveness, insecurity. That is why you should rather start labelling your and your child's feelings, saying "Looks like you are feeling really frustrated or that looks frustrating. You should also give labels to other people's feelings for instance:" The woman in the TV show is really feeling jealous. Try, however, to avoid name-calling. Instead of saying "What an idiot" say: "He must be angry to say that". When your kids are whiny or crying, you should rather say: "You seem sad," than just asking them to stop. Depriving kids of the feelings they are experiencing will only drive them underground and make them stronger.

5. Start coaching your kids. As your children grow older you can start coaching them to help them to be more responsible. Instead of "Get your hat and gloves," you can ask, "What do you need to be ready for school?" Constantly telling your kids what to do does not help them to develop confidence and responsibility.

6. Always be willing to be part of the problem. Good, caring parents willingly listen to their children's problems rather than lecture. Seeing yourself as having something to do with every problem that appears is very supportive. Most problems in families get bigger when parents respond to them in a way that exacerbates the problem. If your child makes a mistake do not tell him: "You see, I told you. But you never listen to me", but show that you are understanding and emphatic. Remember how crucial it is for you to have a calm, reasoned response. Otherwise, your child may start lying to you.

7. Make your kids involved in household duties at an early age. Research suggests that kids who are involved in household chores from an early age tend to be happier and more successful. Why? From an early age, they are made to feel an important part of the family. Children want to belong and feel like they are valuable.

8. Limit your children's access to mass media mania. Young kids need to play, not spend time in front of a screen. To develop creativity and problem-solving skills, allow your kids time to use free play. Much of the mass media market can teach your kids about consumerism, sarcasm and violence. What your kids

learn from you and from free play with others will provide the seeds for future emotional intelligence.

9. Talk about feelings as a family. State your emotional goals as a family. These might be no yelling, no name-calling, be respectful at all times, etc. Families that talk about their goals are more likely to be aware of them and to achieve them.

10. See your children as wonderful. Never underestimate your child. There is no greater way to create emotional intelligence in your child than to see them as wonderful and capable. One law of the universe is, "What you think about expands." If you see your child and think about them as wonderful, you will get a lot of "wonderful." If you think about your child as a problem, you will get a lot of problems.

As Salvo (1998) puts it: "I think in the coming decade we will see well conducted research demonstrating that emotional skills and competencies predict positive outcomes at home with one's family, in school, and at work. The real challenge is to show that emotional intelligence matters over-and-above psychological constructs that have been measured for decades like personality and IQ. I believe that emotional intelligence holds this promise." So as the above arguments show having a high IQ is nice, but having a high "EQ" is even better. Thus, it is of vital importance to parents and educators to cater for the type intelligence that seems to play such a crucial role in shaping the child's future and establishing such firm grounds for it.

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