

How to help kids manage their feelings Submitted by: Michael Grose 10 July



It's official! Emotions are now part of the parenting and educational mainstream!

For some time they've been relegated as a sideshow to the main events of discipline, confidence-building, character building, and lately, resilience.

Not now.

The recently released movie *Inside Out* gives life to emotions in a fun, assessable way. It's a wonderful demonstration of why we must put emotional intelligence front and centre in our parenting and teaching. The quickest pathway to happiness and success is the acceptance and recognition of feelings.

This is not a new idea. Over 2,000 years ago Socrates reminded his Greek compatriots, "Educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all."

Current day muse Dr. Marc Brackett director of the Yale Centre for Emotional Intelligence is more expansive. He says, "Emotions matter as they drive learning, decision-making, creativity, relationships and health."

This is not to say that we ignore children's poor behaviour, neglect to set limits or not ask anything of them when they've experienced hardship at school. Accepting and recognising emotions is an added layer in our interactions with kids, which may well be the missing link for building cooperation, connection and resilience.

Emotions are messy. They can be loud. They can be hidden. They so often interrupt our well-organised schedules. "What do you mean you're sad? We're off to watch a movie. It's a happy time!" Emotions are hard to control and difficult to see. Like slippery eels swimming in a dam, you know that they are down there somewhere but it's hard to figure just what they are doing.

It's a wonder parents haven't smartened up to emotions earlier because 'good parenting' is hard emotional labour. When your three year old throws a tantrum in a supermarket and all you can do is grin and bear it (rather than throwing your own tantrum or doing what you really feel like which is disowning your own child) you're doing hard emotional labour.

When you console and contain the hurt of primary school aged child who throws himself at your feet howling that everyone hates him, you are doing emotional labour.

Staring down a teenager who looks you straight in the eye while spitting out “I hate you!” because you’ve denied their request to go out, is hard emotional labour. Parents do emotional labour all the time. That’s one of the reasons parenting teens can be so draining.

Accepting kids’ emotions means we need to listen to them. We need to be mindful of their feelings as well as their behaviours and thoughts, which is what most parents and teachers are conditioned to do. We’ve built a broad vocabulary around behaviour management featuring terms such as 'consequences', 'limits and boundaries' and 'time out' to name a few. And as the perennial ‘To smack or not to smack’ question shows we are very willing to have debates about behaviour management methods, but discussions about emotional management are few and far between.

The limits of many parents’ emotional vocabularies are matched by the limitations in method as well. Most parents when asked can provide plenty of ways to raise a well-behaved child but I suspect many would struggle if asked to name three or more ways to build their children’s emotional smarts. This is not a criticism but an acknowledgement of lack of training.

Ask yourself, “Who taught you how to recognise, manage and regulate your emotions?” If you identified your parents, then lucky you. They’ve given you the tools you need to enjoy successful relationships, to maximise your earning potential (I kid you not) and to behave like a champ, not a chump when playing sport or participating in other competitive or high performance activities. If you were able to identify any adult at all who taught you emotional intelligence then I suspect you are in rare company. My guess is you probably struggled to identify anyone, so your emotional intelligence (if you’ve read this far you have the emotional smarts needed for focus, self-control and concentration) is unconscious, rather than conscious, making it hard to teach or pass on emotional intelligence skills to kids.

So where do we start exploring this new parenting frontier. Here are five ideas to help you explore the alien landscape of kids’ emotions:

1. Listen first. When your child fusses and fumes about some wrong-doing or hurt they’ve experienced clear your mind and listen. Avoid trying to fix the situation. Show understanding and compassion. There is no better feeling than being understood.

2. Contain rather than manage (let your kids do the managing). Children’s behaviour can become tangled up in upsets and disappointments. It’s hard to separate their behaviour

from their feelings. Sometimes as a loving, caring adult you just have to soak up their feelings, and give them the time and space to soothe their own souls. We don't have to do that for them.

3. Know that emotions can be pleasant and unpleasant. We often place value judgements on emotions by saying some emotions are good or positive (happy, motivated, energised) while some are bad or negative (sad, worried, sullen). Avoid passing judgement in such ways. Recognise that emotions are pleasant or unpleasant and that all emotions are acceptable, whereas some behaviours (such as hurting someone when you are angry) are unacceptable.

4. Build a vocabulary around emotions. Just as feelings have words so too there are names and terms for emotional intelligent parenting method. For instance, 'I-messages' are a type of communication used by parents and adults who take an emotions first approach.

5. Help your kids recognise, then regulate emotions. Ever told a child to calm down only to see their emotions escalate? Kids, like adults, need to recognise their feelings before they can regulate their emotional states, and that's not easy. Emotional recognition is a complex process that takes practice. Even when we are good at it we don't always get it right. Learning to recognise your feelings is a continuous process that's best started when young, before the ups and downs of adolescence becomes a reality.

When emotional intelligence becomes part of your family's DNA then it will be passed down from generation to generation. You'll know it's had generational impact when your children identify you, their mum or dad, as the person who trained them in the skills of emotional intelligence. How cool will that be!