

Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child

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Most parents want their children to grow up to be moral and responsible people who contribute to society and who have good relationships with friends and successful marriages, and who themselves become good parents someday. Love alone, however, is not enough to make this happen. There are additional basic skills that *are* enough when they are consistently practiced by parents and are combined with love. The secret lies in how parents interact with their children when emotions run high. Research by Dr. John Gottman, PhD has revealed that there are five simple skills that parents can do that can help children regulate their own emotional states, more easily sooth themselves, focus their attention better, better understand other people, and have better friendships.

Skill #1: Be aware of your child's emotions. Children, like all people, have reasons for their emotions, whether they can articulate those reasons or not. When you suspect your child is feeling sad, angry, or fearful, it's helpful to try to put yourself in their shoes, to see the world from their perspective. When you feel your heart go out to your child, when you know you are feeling what your child is feeling, you are experiencing empathy, which is the foundation of being able to raise emotionally intelligent children.

Skill #2: Recognize the emotion as an opportunity for intimacy and teaching. Negative experiences, whether it is a popped balloon, a failing math grade, or the betrayal of a friend, can serve as superb opportunities to empathize, to build intimacy with children, and teach them ways to handle their feelings.

Skill #3: Listen empathetically and validate the child's feelings. This is perhaps the most important skill of all. When someone listens empathetically, they use their words to reflect back, in a soothing, non-critical way, what they are hearing and they help their children label their emotions. *They use their hearts to feel what their children are feeling.* As you listen to your child in an emotional moment, be aware that sharing observations usually works better than probing questions to get a conversation going ("why do you feel sad"?). It's better to simply reflect what you notice ("you seem a little tired today" or "I noticed you frown when I mentioned the recital").

Skill #4: Help the child verbally label emotions. This is an easy but very important step. Providing words to help the child label an emotion can help children transform a scary, confusing, uncomfortable feeling into something definable, something that has boundaries and is a normal part of everyday life. Studies indicate that the act of labeling emotions can have a soothing effect on the nervous system.

Skill #5: Set limits while helping the child problem-solve. It is important for children to understand that their *feelings* are not the problem their *misbehavior* is. All feelings and wishes are acceptable, but not all behaviors are. Therefore, it is the parents' job to set limits on acts, not on wishes. Then, work with your child to come up with options for solving the problem.

Gottman, Johh, PhD., Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child: The Heart of Parenting, 1997