

Let Peace Begin at Home



The Do's & Don'ts of Emotionally Intelligent Parenting

Maybe you've read about emotional intelligence and yet after reading the books you're still left with the challenge of applying the principles to your life. What happens when you feel challenged by your child's behavior? Do you

lose your mind? Does your blood boil? Can you stay calm and discover what you and your child really need and feel in that moment?

In his book, *Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child*, John Gottman calls "emotions coaching" the healthiest par-

enting style he observes in his research studies. Responding with empathy and understanding as children experience their natural range of emotions has a proven positive effect on health, school performance and social skills. When children can safely explore their emotional

world with guidance at home, they can navigate all relationships with greater ease and assurance and soothe their own upsets as well. Children learn from their parents how to handle difficult or uncomfortable emotions.

To succeed as emotions coach- 19 ▶

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es, parents need to know what to do as well as what not to do. Responsive parenting takes patience—and plenty of it! Initiating new habits requires focused attention, practice and repetition. Remember to be gentle with yourself, your spouse and your child/ren.

SET THE TONE. BE HONEST. APOLOGIZE.

Do as the flight attendant says and “Secure your own mask before assisting others.” Remaining calm and attentive allows children to soothe themselves rather than escalate into conflict. Children match our emotions through the activation of mirror neurons. Modeling self-awareness is important because children learn by watching and imitating. Since parents are only human and are certainly not calm all of the time, be honest and admit your stressors without overloading your children with your own issues. When you make a mistake or behave badly, apologize: “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to yell at you. I’m really tired, that’s all.”

DON'T LET WHAT WAS DONE OR NOT DONE TO YOU LIMIT YOUR JOY AND SATISFACTION.

Notice if your emotional heritage is impeding your current relationships. Pay special attention to what causes you to overreact with defensiveness or anger. Do you recognize that feeling from your past? Clear out any leftover emotional baggage that is unnecessarily burdening your current relationships.

“The first step parents can take toward raising emotionally intelligent children is to understand their own style of dealing with emotion and how it affects their kids.”
-John Gottman

KNOW YOUR TRIGGERS. TAKE THE HIGH ROAD.

In his book *Emotional Intelligence*, Daniel Goleman describes how our primitive fight-flight brain fires-up automatically whenever we face apparent danger or scenarios requiring defensive or of-

fensive maneuvers. Getting triggered by fear or anger can send us down the physiology of the low road: heightened senses, surging adrenaline and increased blood pressure. You may feel like you’re losing your mind when your prefrontal cortex temporarily goes offline and you respond from the primitive fight-flight part of your brain. To preempt the low brain’s automatic response, we need to

promptly engage the high brain or prefrontal cortex to make a more informed, reasoned response. Recognize your triggers and stay on the high road by taking a deep breath, counting to ten, putting yourself in timeout, and practicing doing/saying nothing until you can respond mindfully.

DON'T HUMILIATE. NO SHAME, NO BLAME, NO SARCASM.

The tone of our responses determines the lens our children see themselves through. Disapproving parenting does the most damage, according to John Gottman. Put-downs, name calling and derogatory comments tear down trust and good will in long-term relationships. Though meant in jest, echoes of sarcastic jabs may linger long after the moment has passed. When you are annoyed or disagree, use I-statements that focus on the behavior, not the child: “I don’t like loud banging in the living room.” Describe what you need and suggest acceptable alternatives: “I need some quiet time now. If you want to drum, can you please drum outside or in the other room?”

BE AN EMOTIONS DETECTIVE. ALLOW AND ACKNOWLEDGE FEELINGS.

In his book *The Relationship Cure*, John Gottman explains that many behaviors are a bid for emotional connection. Does your three-year-old tug on your leg whenever you are on the 20▶

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telephone? Behaviors clue us in to underlying feelings and needs. To address the core issue, acknowledge feelings and needs instead of denying, ignoring or resisting them. Instead of “you’re okay, that didn’t really hurt,” how about: “that must have really hurt.” Or instead of “don’t cry, you’ll get to go another time,” try, “you must really wish you could go too.” Allowing and acknowledging feelings allows them to morph and dissipate more easily.

LISTEN WITH EMPATHY

Most of us do not want or need someone to give us advice or solve our problems—we just need someone to listen. By repeating back what you hear without adding your agenda, you show that you care and can let your children work through their own solutions. Examples: “Sounds like you had a rough day. I’m sorry,” or, “I’ll bet you’re really disappointed that you didn’t make the team. Want to talk about it?” Being heard and understood is

a gift we can give our children every day. If you don’t have time to listen, make an appointment: “I’d love to hear more about that. Can we talk after school?”

GUIDE DON’T CRITICIZE

Tame your inner critic or negative self-talk and be gentle with yourself, your spouse and your child/ren. Your critic was installed so long ago you might not even notice it much any more. If you’re replaying old messages that berate and criticize, you’ll need to delete those so that you don’t pass your critic voice on to your children. Why not change “Hurry up, what’s the matter with you?” to “What do we need to do to get ready on time?”

MOST IMPORTANTLY, SHOW YOUR LOVE

Children thrive on loving attention—smiles, hugs and fun times together. Children crave memorable moments when you are attentive, relaxed and enjoying each other. Spend as much time as you can sharing favorite activities like reading, playing, building, cooking, snuggling and being silly together so your

RELATED RESOURCES

BOOKS

- *Raising and Emotionally Intelligent Child: The Heart of Parenting* by John Gottman, Ph.D. with Joan DeClaire.
- *The Relationship Cure* by John Gottman, Ph.D. and Joann DeClaire
- *Emotional Intelligence* by Daniel Goleman
- *Social Intelligence* by Daniel Goleman

WEBSITES

- Daniel Goleman (see Topics links); www.danielgoleman.info.
- The Gottman Institute (see Parenting link); www.gottman.com.

children feel loved for who they are, not what they do or do not do. You’ll find the sweet, lasting joys of parenting here. ■



As a Certified Family Effectiveness Trainer and Parent Coach, writer Kristen Meyer Stroud assists parents to love more, worry less, and reclaim the joy and satisfaction of parenting.

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