

EMPOWERING CHILDREN TO BUILD EMOTIONAL COMPETENCE

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Helping children become self aware and to manage their emotions and reactions is one of the greatest gifts that we can give to them. This is part of building emotional intelligence. And, we now know that EQ is the greatest determiner of success for all of us.

To become self-aware, children need practice at identifying when they are angry, afraid, sad, ashamed or happy. A wonderful way to do this is to sit down as a family and brainstorm different situations where family members are having a difficult emotional time. It might be that mom or dad gets angry when everyone wants something while they are making dinner. Or one of the children gets very upset when someone uses his toys. The brainstorming session doesn't have to be long or all inclusive, but should illustrate situations where the frustration level is high. It's important to do this when there is not a major problem or frustration at hand, as this exercise is a proactive one.

Many in the psychological community use 5 primary emotions, under which more specific feelings can be identified. The primary emotions are: angry, sad, happy, afraid and ashamed. The brainstorming session is a great way to begin to help children (and adults) identify their emotions and situations that may trigger those emotions. The short meeting might sound like this:

"So, what situations cause you to feel angry?" (write these down)

"What things cause us to feel sad?" (write these down)

"When do we feel ashamed?" (write down)

"How about situations that cause us to be afraid?" (write down)

Once you have brainstormed a list of frustrating situations for members of your family, begin to talk about ways you can respond in a productive manner. The end goal of this talk will to have a list of choices that the children and adults can choose from when they are not operating in their pre-frontal cortex. This is a valuable discussion to have with children. It doesn't need to be complicated or full of the most recent brain research. It can be simple:

"When we're not feeling good, it is really hard to make good decisions. So, we're going to make a list of ideas of positive things that we can do when we're not feeling great."

From here, the family brainstorms ideas, with the guidance of the adults, choices that can be made when someone is not feeling good. Here are some examples:

- Take time to cool off
- Apologize
- Ask for help
- Ask for what you want, politely and directly
- Try again
- Work it out together
- Use "I" language
- Take turns
- Let it go (a much healthier reaction than "ignoring it", which is hard to do when you're not feeling good)
- Etc.

In the school that I direct, we use this exercise to help the children become independent problem solvers. We put the choices on a wheel with a brad that mounts it to a piece of card stock. The wheel looks like a sliced pie, with productive choices (like those listed above). When the children are feeling frustrated and need redirection, we suggest that they use the wheel to help them decide what to do. The children then go to the wheel and turn it until they find a solution that works for them. It may be that this going through this process may help them simply find their own creative and positive response rather than one on the wheel. Of course, that is OK! For younger children there are pictures on the wheel that represent the solutions. And just as important, the adults in the classroom will often model using the wheel as well.

What we are trying to help the children accomplish by using the decision making wheel is to move their focus and attention to the frontal lobe (thinking) from the limbic area (feeling). Just by using the wheel they will take a few minutes to stop, think, organize their thoughts and then make a positive, solution oriented decision. By helping them to identify how they are feeling, giving some validation and then focusing on pre-thought out solutions this begins to happen. And, the children begin to become accustomed to going into problem solving mode when they are upset or frustrated (under stress) vs. identifying themselves as victims and reacting from that place. They also learn incredibly valuable life-skills like self-evaluation and proactive problem-solving.