

Emotionally Intelligent Parenting

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For many parents a 'little bundle of joy' in reality often translates into a lot of hard work. But the hard work referred to doesn't only mean the grind of nappies, feeding, bathing and cleaning. More so one of the biggest challenges parents face is that children - in their innocence - are very successful at testing our sense of who we are.

Parenting is one of the toughest tasks on earth and it's also the one job we're least prepared for. So mostly we raise children as we ourselves were parented. Yet in a world that's rapidly changing, we need to stop and consider whether inflicting our own emotional upbringing on our children is appropriate for them to cope in today's world.

When it comes to the field of emotional intelligence (EQ) many parents express great interest in wishing to learn more about raising emotionally intelligent children. Although there are some helpful books on the subject (see below), only people with a healthy level of EQ can hope to raise children with a high degree of this vital intelligence.

Broadly speaking, EQ is defined as emotional maturity. But more importantly, the combination of emotional and social skills is a key aspect that determines success in later life. So instead of putting pressure on little Jane or Johnny to aspire to MENSA, you're better off encouraging him or her to be a mensch!

One of the most difficult aspects of parenting is that it so often makes our own insecurities surface. And if we don't know how to deal with these, we can take them out on our children. People who haven't got the skills to overcome their own inadequacies become emotionally numb or brittle. This dangerously interferes with their relationship with their children.

One of the key hallmarks of having a healthy level of EQ is the ability to be relatively happy most of the time. Now before you dismiss this by labelling it 'gushy', being happy is far more than a luxury some people don't seem to be able to afford. Firstly, it's the only state of mind that makes us productive and secondly we can't hope to raise happy children unless we are real role models of it ourselves.

But in a world that makes so many demands on our time, we often give our attention to the more mundane aspects of child rearing. So instead of ranting about homework, packing schoolbooks, tog bags and lunches, far more can be achieved by bringing some happiness into the home. Now while this may sound

oversimplified, happiness is about making sure our own needs are met. And this is particularly difficult for parents - especially if you make children your priority. Yet if you think about it, when our needs are met we're often calmer and ultimately have more of ourselves to give.

So many adults today were raised by unhappy and insecure people. This leaves us with a very cut down view of who we are. Yet, deep inside of us, every human being has the gifts and talents necessary to make a terrific success of our lives. Each person doesn't have within them all the talents available but individually we do have exactly what we personally need. Only by knowing how special we are can our particular talents be released. And to help our children we need to tell them how extraordinary they are over and over again. But instead of speaking to them in general terms given them specific examples they can relate to.

As parents only we can nurture these special gifts in our children. Unless you're really lucky, school won't encourage individual talent. Mostly it gives children the impression that it's important to all be the same. So instead of foisting our dreams on our children, let them pursue their own unique interests in a non-pressurised way.

A friend showed a great example of this courageous behaviour. He was proudly telling me how he had bought a kiddies' motorbike for his six-year old son's birthday. To his grave disappointment the child showed no interest in the gift at all. Knowing that his own unfulfilled dream was to be a motocross champion, he - with difficulty - tucked his own insecurities away and swapped the motorbike for a piano. This didn't please him, but it thrilled his son. Getting to know your children and encouraging them when their particular interests is essential if you want to grow emotionally healthy individuals.

Of great concern is the way life today hammers a child's self-esteem. The ability to believe in yourself and your own abilities is one of the foundation stone's of adult success. Yet, with so much pressure on children to perform, their early lives often leave them believing that they are either average or are not capable of anything at all. Many children's difficulties can be eased if parents go out of their way to protect their child's self-value.

But many adults themselves have been raised on large doses of negative reinforcement. And from their own early experiences they should recall that instead of motivating them, it destroys young minds. Even so for parents who now struggle with their own self-esteem, giving a child plenty of positive feedback is emotionally tricky. To overcome these obstacles, parents need to work on their own sense of self.

Imagine having been raised by people who constantly told you how lovable, talented, gifted and special you are. For many people this is so inconceivable that they believe it would turn any child into an impossible brat. This myth is of great concern because it continues to feed the kind of negative reinforcement that is damaging.

What's more alarming is that these and many other inappropriate ideas are being perpetuated. From Daniel Goleman's work - the original author on emotional intelligence – we know that with each generation levels of EQ are declining. This isn't surprising when parents hold onto beliefs that simply aren't working.

Children can be protected from many of life's ups-and-downs if they know they are deeply loved. Parents can never say these words enough. For children, feeling that they are loved provides a safe space from which they can explore their own unique identities and experience their world. Even although older children may make a show of rebuffing parent's affection, the words 'I love you' are still music to their ears.

Don't we also need to have more fun at home? Of course time is limited. But some of the non-essential drudgery tasks can be replaced by really enjoying your children. We know laughter is the best medicine. And when we stop taking ourselves so seriously, we're teaching our children one of the most important fundamentals; that experiencing life is meant to be fun.

To help heal our adult issues, much can be gained by listening to our own feelings. Emotions provide a constant stream of important information. They tell us about the choices we're making and the life we're leading and the emotional dictionary in *EQ: Emotional Intelligence for Everyone*, can be used to help decode these messages.

By understanding the language of our feelings, we're better able to cope with all the demands life makes upon us. Once we're schooled in this language, we can use it to coach our children and help them to become more literate about their own emotional lives.

So when it comes to raising emotionally intelligent children, work at clearing the emotional issues and deep-rooted beliefs that complicate the already difficult job of parenting. And by focusing on our own enrichment, parenting can become a bundle of joy for both our children and ourselves.

Parenting books on EQ:

The Heart of Parenting - John Gottman & *Emotionally Intelligent Parenting* - M. Elias

Stephanie Vermeulen of *The Effective Training Corporation* runs practical emotional intelligence programmes for all levels in business.

Her books, *Stitched-up: Who Fashions Women's Lives?* and *EQ: Emotional Intelligence for Everyone* are available from all leading bookstores and online from Amazon and Kalahari. She can be contacted on:

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