

Emotional Intelligence Creates Loving and Supportive Parenting

[John Gottman, Ph.D.](#) // August 8, 2018

In the foreword to my book, [Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child](#), famed researcher on emotional intelligence, [Daniel Goleman](#), writes:

These are hard times for children, and so for parents. There has been a sea change in the nature of childhood over the last decade or two, one that makes it harder for children to learn the basic lessons of the human heart and one that ups the ante for parents who used to pass these lessons on to the children they love. Parents have to be smarter about teaching their children basic emotional and social lessons.

Before I became a father, I had spent nearly twenty years working in the field of developmental psychology, studying the emotional lives of children. But it was not until our daughter arrived that I began to truly understand the realities of a parent-child relationship. I had no idea of the intensity of feeling I would have for my child, or how thrilled I would be when she learned new things, or how much attention and patience it would require. And I remembered how dangerous the world can be, and I felt vulnerable because losing her would mean losing everything.

As a Jew whose parents escaped Austria during the Holocaust, I had respected the efforts of other theorists who rejected authoritarianism as a way to raise morally healthy children. They proposed that the family operate as a democracy and that children and parents act as rational, equal partners. My years of investigation into family dynamics began to yield new evidence that emotional interactions between parent and child would have an even greater impact on a child's long-term well-being.

That greater impact on long-term well-being results in building [a child's](#)

[emotional intelligence](#), which is important because, more than IQ, emotional intelligence seems to determine success in life. The ability to understand other people and work with them is critical to success in modern work life. It is also critical in relationships, and we know that having [successful friendships and romantic relationships](#) confers enormous benefits in health, wealth, happiness, longevity, and the success of one's children.

Emotional intelligence informs Emotion Coaching as a parenting method

When it comes to parenting and emotional intelligence, there are two groups of parents that are so very different when it comes to the world of emotions. Emotion Dismissing parents are action-oriented, and don't want to become emotional, and they see this as potentially destructive in themselves and in their children. Emotion Coaching parents are the opposite: accepting of emotions and explore emotions in themselves and others.

In [our research](#), we found that the effects of these two approaches were dramatic. The children of the two kinds of parents were on totally different life trajectories. And when it came to divorced families with children, I was also surprised that emotion coaching buffered children from almost all the negative effects of their parents divorcing. Two kids with the same IQ starting at age 4 would have entirely different educational achievement at age 8 if their parents were emotion coaching, all mediated through differences in attentional abilities.

Even more powerful is that these results all appear to be cross-culturally universal.

Emotional intelligence in parenting begins with the self

What turns out to be really wonderful about our results is that, with emotional intelligence, one needs to begin with one's self. It is important to understand one's own feelings about emotions, and to learn that self-

understanding comes from recognizing one's own feelings. Emotions are our internal "GPS" through life. Opening up our own emotional world and being emotional is where we need to start, and it confers huge gifts.

Yet being emotional doesn't mean you aren't rational. The two often seem in opposition—emotional reactions versus logical responses. But you can have both. As a parent, you can also be emotional with your child—not abusive (which would be the opposite of emotional intelligence), but emotional. You can be angry, hurt, disappointed, tense, frustrated, and so on. This seems inevitable in parenting, and if you model a positive approach to handling your own emotions, your child will likely notice.

And you can let your child know that their anger is okay with you, that you can understand their anger. But you can also tell them that when they say that they "hate" you, this really hurts your feelings and it makes you not want to be around them.

Parents do not have to take abuse from their kids, and as part of teaching emotional intelligence, it's okay to let children know when they are being hurtful or abusive, too. If you [model an emotional yet respectful response](#) to something like "I hate you," children will pick up on that kind of response. They'll know that what they are saying is actually hurtful. They'll begin to understand how it makes you feel, which then can inform how they emotionally handle other relationships in their lives.

When to start with [Emotion Coaching](#)—our program to teach emotional intelligence

Our evidence shows that emotion coaching begins in the way parents interact *with their babies*. Babies can understand language long before they can talk. As early as ten months of age, emotion coaching parents are narrating their children's play, asking them questions, communicating empathy, and giving reasons for saying "yes" or "no." This has major consequences for the baby's development, as does a positive relationship between parents. We even have a

workshop called [Bringing Baby Home](#) that helps couples with the transition to parenthood so that their relationship is strong and models positive emotional behavior for children.

But it's also never too late to become an emotion coaching parent. I have had parents start with adult children and say that they have been close to their kids for the very first time, ever. Emotional intelligence is not a static trait—it can be cultivated and learned at any point in life, by anyone, to their benefit and the benefit of those they interact with.

Here's how it can start: one of the most powerful gifts you can give your child is an admission that you made a mistake, and apologizing and asking for forgiveness confers respect to the child. The child learns that it is okay to make a mistake and correct it. The child learns that it is possible to repair interaction. And the child feels that their emotions are respected and that you, instead of being authoritative, are capable of being an emotional equal.

Most importantly, the child learns that one can be loved without being perfect. That feeling of unconditional love, of being able to repair negative interactions, of being mindful of your own emotions and those around you—that's a wonderful foundation upon which any child, with their parents' guidance, can build a fulfilling and successful life.

If you want to build a deeply meaningful relationship full of trust and intimacy, then subscribe below to receive our blog posts directly to your inbox:

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World-renowned for his work on marital stability and divorce prediction, Dr. John Gottman has conducted 40 years of breakthrough research with thousands of couples. He is the author of over 200 published academic articles and author or co-author of more than 40 books, including *The New*

York Times bestseller [*The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*](#).