

Why We Need to Teach Kids Emotional Intelligence

The Most Important Thing We Can Teach Our Children

For years, I've taught a weekly psychology class to students ranging from 7 to 14 years-old. In this class, I encourage self-reflection, asking kids to identify and express what they think and feel and to consider the thoughts and feelings of others. The results are often surprising. Strong, self-aware statements come out of their mouths that I don't always expect. "I feel bad about myself in class. I worry I'll be slower than everyone else." "I'm angry when my dad won't take time to help me with my homework. It makes me not want to try anymore." "I hate it when my friends don't want to play with me. So, I yell, but that just makes it worse."

Too often, we tend to think of our kids as less sophisticated and incapable of processing or [understanding](#) the emotional complexities of their world. We think we're protecting them by not bringing up the trickier, less pleasant subjects. But I can tell you firsthand that kids absorb a tremendous amount. Pretty much as soon as they're verbal, children can be taught to identify and communicate their feelings. In a trusted [environment](#) where emotions are talked about openly, most kids will speak freely about their feelings and are quick to have empathy for their peers.

With their brains growing at a rapid rate, all children are constantly noticing, reacting, adapting and developing ideas based on their emotional experiences. This leaves me to wonder why we give our child an [education](#) in so many subjects, teaching them to sound out words and brush their teeth, and yet we fail to equip them with an emotional education that can dramatically improve the quality of their lives.

When you teach kids [emotional intelligence](#), how to recognize their feelings, understand where they come from and learn how to deal with them, you teach them the most essential skills for their success in life. Research has shown that emotional [intelligence](#) or EQ “predicts over 54% of the variation in success (relationships, effectiveness, [health](#), quality of life).” Additional data concludes that “young people with high EQ earn higher grades, stay in school, and make healthier choices.”

At this year’s [Wisdom 2.0](#), I felt inspired by a talk by Dr. Marc Brackett, the Director of the [Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence](#), who talked at length about the importance of teaching kids to know their emotions. The Center has developed the RULER program for schools. RULER is an acronym that stands for **R**ecognizing emotions in self and others, **U**nderstanding the causes and consequences of emotions, **L**abeling emotions accurately, **E**xpressing emotions appropriately and **R**egulating emotions effectively. The program has been shown to boost student’s emotional intelligence and social skills, [productivity](#), academic performance, [leadership](#) skills and attention, while reducing anxiety, [depression](#) and instances of [bullying](#) between students. RULER creates an all-around positive environment for both students and teachers, with less [burnout](#) on both ends.

These five RULER principles run parallel in many ways to social intelligence pioneer and author of *Emotional Intelligence: Why it Can Matter More than IQ*, Daniel Goleman’s five components of emotional intelligence. You can see how each of these elements would contribute to an individual's personal success and sense of well-being.

1. **Self-awareness.** Knowing our own emotions.
2. **[Self-regulation](#).** Being able to regulate and control how we react to our emotions.
3. **Internal [motivation](#).** Having a sense of what’s important in life.
4. **Empathy.** Understanding the emotions of others.
5. **Social skills.** Being able to build social connections.

As parents, when we don't have a healthy way of handling emotions ourselves, we have trouble teaching our kids to handle theirs. That is why the change starts with us. Fortunately, all five components of emotional intelligence can be taught and learned at any age. There are many tools and techniques that can help us and our children start to identify and understand the emotions of ourselves and others. This process begins with recognition, because it's only when we notice where we're at that we're able to shift ourselves to where we want to be.

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When we acknowledge the profound influence of emotions in our lives, we inspire a new attitude toward self-awareness and mental health. We can then start to ask broader questions, like how can we create a movement to increase the emotional intelligence of future generations?

One place to start is with [mindfulness](#). [Studies](#) have found that a [mindfulness](#) practice can help reduce symptoms of [stress](#), depression and [anxiety](#) in children. It can also [increase gray matter density](#) in regions of the [brain](#) involved in emotional regulation. Another [study](#) of adolescents found that yoga, which can increase mindfulness, helped improve student's emotional regulation capacity.

On a systemic level, we can help raise the emotional intelligence of future generations by working together to get our schools to implement programs like RULER. On a face-to-face level, as parents, teachers, friends and caretakers, we can open up a dialogue and encourage kids to express what they're feeling. We can teach them what co-author of [Parenting from the Inside Out](#) [Dr. Daniel Siegel](#) often refers to as "name it to tame it," in which children learn that naming their feelings can help them get a hold on them. We can also talk more about our own feelings, being honest and direct about the times when we feel sad, angry or even afraid.

When we mess up or act out with or around our children, instead of trying to

sweep it under the rug, we should acknowledge what occurred in us and repair any emotional damage we may have caused. In taking these each of these steps, we create an environment in which our children can continually make sense of their emotions and experiences. This skill set is perhaps the largest predictor of not only their success in life, but more importantly, their [happiness](#).

To read more from Dr. Lisa Firestone visit [PsychAive.org](https://www.psychaive.org)