

Children and Emotional Resilience

Children need a certain amount of resilience to be able to cope with the ups and downs that occur as part of living. They need to learn how to cope with life's disappointments and troubles, to bounce back from stressful experiences, recover from misfortune, ready to try again another time.

As children face the rough and tumble of life they are emotionally challenged. When they regulate their emotions and respond to life's uncertainties and challenges in constructive ways, they are demonstrating the intelligent use of their emotions - intentionally making their emotions work for them rather than holding them captive.

To achieve this end, children need to develop five emotional capabilities: knowing one's emotions; managing emotions; motivating oneself; recognizing emotions in others; handling emotions (Salovey and Mayer 1990). These domains are hierarchical, with each domain building on the previous domains.

Emotional resilience is a valuable skill for all children. It is about being in control and believing in one's ability to work through setbacks and risk situations in a capable, effective manner. This capacity for resilience empowers the child to develop coping behaviours, to persist in the face of failure, to bounce back with confidence and a healthy self-esteem.

'A resilient mindset provides a basic foundation and reservoir of emotional strength and can be called on to manage daily challenges' (Brooks and Goldstein 2003).

Children and Emotions

Emotions are regulators of behaviour within oneself and in interaction with others.

Children need to know their emotions, recognize an emotion as it happens. They need to express, understand and regulate their emotions, recognize emotions in others, and handle relationships with others if they are to be well-adjusted, contented, positive and resilient individuals. They need to learn that all emotions are okay, and that they are entitled to their emotions.

Children need to realize that others' emotional experience can differ from their own. They have got to develop an understanding that others have emotions also. They need to develop the ability to interpret the emotional behaviours of others. This means reading other people's emotions by tone of voice, facial expression or body language, not necessarily words.

Children who can understand their own and other people's emotions, are in a stronger position to solve social conflicts than children who have not developed an understanding of their own / other's emotions. They are also in a more fortunate position when it comes to maintaining social relationships with others.

Children need to develop an emotional vocabulary, identify emotion- eliciting situations, recognize their emotions and what their emotions mean, understand that they can feel one way and act in a different way, and that they can change their emotions by changing their thinking, doing and physiology.

Children need to learn to project their emotions forward, predicting the outcome of their behaviours as well as distinguishing between emotions, thinking, doing and physiology. They need to respond to their emotions and express them safely and assertively, proportionate to the circumstances.

Children need to let their emotions drive them but not take control of them. Unexpressed emotions get stored up, causing hurt, anger, depression, anxiety, and poor self-image. Children often lash out at others when they feel sad, upset, frustrated, embarrassed, humiliated, or excluded. Angry outbursts and overreacting are often the result of not expressing underlying emotions.

An increase in escalating emotions and challenging behaviours probably indicates an increase in stress. It is important to get to the root of the child's emotions, what may be driving the emotions in the

first place. For example, the emotional roots of anger are guilt, fear, hurt and helplessness (Leaman 2006 p. 30).

Children need to recognize personal body signals as their emotions are escalating so that they can take charge of their emotions rather than let their emotions have power over them. This way they are developing emotional strength, flexibility and resilience, staying engaged and connected under pressure.

Children benefit from learning how to deal with people, events and things that escalate their emotions. These emotions may be pleasurable or distressing. Children also need to understand the situations that produce their emotional states (e.g., the link between loss and sadness) and what they can do or /and think to change emotional states.

The Relationship Between Autistic Spectrum Disorder, Emotion Management and Behaviour Development and Management

Children on the autistic spectrum, to a greater or lesser degree, present with subtle or significant difficulties in communication, socialization and imagination. Communication difficulties may be the result of misunderstanding the meaning of words and the speaker's intentions, intonation patterns, facial expressions and body language. Socialization complications may result from difficulties relating to people in meaningful ways, developing friendships, and empathy. Imagination difficulties may include rigidity in thinking, ritualistic behaviours and obsessional behaviours.

Consequently children on the autistic spectrum may be oblivious to, overwhelmed with, or bemused by social nuances. As a result they may not accurately decode and interpret the social cues of their environment. Behaviours including unruliness, aggression, detachment, isolation, disorientation, frustration and stress may be some of the coping mechanisms children with ASD adopt as they attempt to survive this complex terrain of the social world.

Our challenge is to teach children with ASD more appropriate means of behaving and adapting to their environment.

Teaching not Telling

Children on the autistic spectrum benefit from being taught constructive ways of behaving in the social world. This teaching needs to be based on the paradigm of behaviour teaching and learning.

The basic principles of this paradigm include the following: responsibility for behaviour sits with the owner of the behaviours and support is given to the learner; what you teach is what you get – where you teach it is where you get it; if you always do what you have always done, you will always get what you have always got; plan behaviour teaching; when teaching emotion management, teach generalization not one site mastery.

Our challenge with emotion management is to teach children appropriate ways of behaving and adapting to their environment. Instruction in the use of the emotion management tools should be direct and specific. Explain and discuss the purpose of / for the tool as well as how to execute the tool, where and where. Be explicit when teaching the tool. Give instruction in a manner that appeals to children's learning styles. Never be vague or ambiguous in language content. Model the tool prior to inviting the children to role-play using the tool across different social scenarios. Get the children to practice using the tool in real life contexts. Provide children with feedback and correction. Continually assess children's mastery using the emotion management tools. Provide additional instruction as required.

In this teaching process, concentrate on the children's ability to generalize their emotion management strategies across social contexts.

The Role of the Adult

To support children with ASD learn to regulate their emotions the adult needs to take on the role of social coach. This is an intentional and deliberate role.

Effective social coaches have the ability to actually understand each child and know each child's preferred way of learning and connecting with the social world. They teach in a way that enables children to learn. They focus on children developing mastery as a social player in the real world.

The coach assists the children predict the game ahead, advises what emotion management tools to use and names potential pitfalls ahead. The coach cannot use the tools for the child, the child needs to use the tools

for themselves. The coach will intentionally position themselves on the sidelines as the supporter of the child, debriefing later on with the child – after the child has executed the tools in the real world.

Children learn in ways that are identifiably distinctive. According to the American psychologist Howard Gardner (1983)¹ there are at least eight different 'frames of mind', eight distinctive intelligences. Some children are word smart (verbal / linguistic), number smart (logical / mathematical), picture smart (visual / spatial), body smart (body / kinaesthetic), music smart (musical / rhythmic), people smart (interpersonal / social), and self smart (intrapersonal / introspective), nature smart (naturalist).

Make sure you choose instructional strategies that cater for these eight intelligences: read it, tell it, write it, talk it, listen (word smart), think critically about it, evaluations, sequencing, itemizing, problem solving, logic games (number smart), visualize it, puzzles, 3-D modelling, draw it, murals (picture smart), hands on, dancing, manipulate, role playing, relaxation (body smart), sing it, listen to it, chant it, jingles, pantomimes, lyrics (music smart), interact with it, collaborate, converse, social gatherings, conferencing (people smart), personal reflections, make choices with regard to it, solo projects, diaries, journaling (self smart), connect it to living things, nature encounters, nature field trips, stories about natural objects, plants and animals (nature smart).

Provide wide-ranging opportunities whereby children can explore the emotion world, learn to understand their own and others emotions, and express their own emotions appropriately. Support children learn how to articulate their emotions and respond to their own and others emotions, safely and legally.

Remember, children do not start out knowing the names of emotions any more than they do the names of animals or toys. They must be taught.

Let's Get Down to SOME Practicalities

Here are some 'hands on' emotional literacy ideas to use with children to get them talking and thinking about their emotions:

- Create a 'Feelings' work bank – happy, glad, friendly, kind, thoughtful, caring, sad, worried, mad.
- Suggest words that children can use to express their feelings and describe actions.
- Create emotion face masks.
- Play mood music and invite children to move to the music. Compare and contrast the emotion mood music.
- Draw or paint emotion stick figures and make up social stories with the stick figures as the central characters.
- Emotion cartoon strip sequence stories.
- Play emotion charades – act out emotions. The audience predicts the self talk that may accompany the emotion being portrayed.
- Create a feelings book – camera shots of child expressing that feeling; a magazine cut out of someone expressing that feeling.
- Make up an emotions-thinking-doing-physiology dictionary.
- Puppet shows presenting hypothetical social situations to encourage range of possible solutions to social conflict.
- Have group discussion about friends and friendships.
- Talk self talk (helpful and unhelpful) aloud and invite the children to guess the emotions.
- Create various scrapbooks illustrating different emotion. Compare and contrast scrapbooks.
- Use felt board faces to depict different emotions. Discuss self-talk accompanying these emotions.
- Invite children to journal their head and heart version of events.
- Pass the sentence – 'This is how I felt when ... and this is what I was thinking'; 'When I was thinking ... I was feeling ...'
- Take photographs of children demonstrating staying calm behaviours. Display these photographs on a bulletin board and invite the children to add thinking and talking bubbles.
- Create emotion faces mobiles - angry: frowning, squinting, pouting, open mouth; worried: eyes open widely or clenched tightly, lips pressed together, hands on face or forehead.
- Write a poem/jingle/rap/chant about different emotions / characters. Include the head and the heart part to the character adventures.

¹ Gardner proposed the eighth intelligence Naturalist in 1998.

Emotion Management Toolkits

Emotion management toolkits combine practical strategies that children can use – proactively and reactively – in response to stress inducing and emotion escalating situations. The purpose of using these tools is to regulate one's emotions, not to ruminate and obsess about the situations.

Tools are used to support children balance their emotions, not suppress them. When emotional upsets are left unchecked that can interfere with one's emotional health and well-being.

As Goleman (1995) explained ...'Students who are anxious, angry, or depressed don't learn; people who are caught in these states do not take in information efficiently or deal with it well ... When emotions overwhelm concentration, what is being swamped is the mental capacity cognitive scientists call 'working memory', the ability to hold in mind all information relevant to the task at hand.' (Goleman pp. 78-79).

'Tools' represent the term strategies and 'toolkit' the storage place for these strategies.

What Tools go in the Toolkit?

Events that may cause emotion escalation for one child may not cause escalation for another child. Consequently each child's emotion management toolkit will be distinctive to that child. It will contain the emotion regulation tools that each child needs to support them understand, express and manage their emotions. The coach works with the child to decide what tools are most appropriate for their specific social emotional needs and then teaches and coaches the child in the proficient use of the tools in the real world.

Tools may change over time – some will remain constant, some may be discarded, others will be added.

The range of tools is many and varied, a sample of which follows: About Me Tool; Affirmation Tool; Choice Making Tool; Connections Tool; Dial-A-Smile Tool; Doing Something for Others Tool; Exercise Tool; First Response Tool; Loving Tool; Survival Bag Tool; *What to When ... Guidebook Tool*.

Children can use the tools in isolation or in combination. They can be used on the spot, before or after a stressful event. They are portable, do not depend on others and do not cost money.

Tools will need to be taught to the children. Children may require tutoring in the use of the tools as they develop their competencies and capabilities as emotion management tool user's.

The benefit of the toolkit is only as good as the children's efforts in using the tools. Learning to use the tools in and across social contexts will take time. It will require persistence and determination, a willingness to 'have a go', a readiness to be reflective. It will entail the companionship of a social coach, willing to walk alongside the child, teaching and tutoring the child so the social emotional world becomes less a minefield and more a mindfield of golden opportunities.

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