

Parenting *ideas* INSIGHTS

Building parent-school partnerships

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Healthy ways for kids to manage their emotions

Emotionally intelligent children, like their parents, know a range of healthy ways to manage their feelings.

What training did you get from your parents in recognising or regulating your feelings – in other words, in managing your emotions? If you are like me, you didn't get much really constructive help at all.

"Don't worry! It will all turn out right!" was about the extent of the emotional management in my house, and I suspect in most other houses at that time.

I guess that's why many people automatically default to ineffective ways of dealing with their feelings – such as avoidance, denial and straight-up worrying – when difficult emotions emerge.

Those ineffective strategies are then passed on to their children. Little wonder that anxiety, anger and apathy are commonplace among today's children and young people, even though we live in affluent times.

Sometimes, despite what we were taught, it's better to find ways to deal with negative feelings rather than avoiding them. Avoiding them can allow them to overwhelm us or cause us to act out. Here are seven healthy ways to manage your emotions that you can pass on to your children:

1 Breathe deeply

The trick here is to take deep breaths, rather than shallow breaths. The easiest way to breathe deeply is to sit up straight (or stand up straight). Count to 3 quietly while breathing in through your nose, and count to 5 while breathing out. Breathe slowly and deeply. You may even feel a little 'heady', which indicates deep (and low) breathing.

2 Find a favourite relaxation exercise

There are many instant relaxation exercises you can use to change your emotional state. My favourite way to manage nerves and tension is to tense my body for 3 seconds and then relax. Repeat this a number of times and you can't help but feel calmer. You can isolate part of your body such as your shoulders and arms to release the tension around your neck. There are plenty of quick techniques you can use to relax.

3 Use a positive reappraisal

Emotions are caused not by an event, but by the way we look at an event. To one person, giving a wedding speech is a chance to strut

their stuff (so they feel excited), while to someone else it is nothing but a nightmare (so they feel anxious). Change the way you view something and you'll better be able to manage your emotional response. "This is a challenge, not a problem" is a catch-all reappraisal. The more specific the reappraisal the more effective it will be.

4 Use positive, REALISTIC self-talk

Ever talked yourself out of doing something exciting, new or challenging before you've even started? Maybe you've said something like: "I'll never be able to do that" or "This will stress me out big time" or "I'm no good at...."? I know I have.

Next time you catch yourself talking yourself (or something else) down, replace the negative with something realistic but more positive. Something like "I've done it in the past and I survived. So I should be able to do it again." Repeat this a few times and your emotional state will shift to a better one.

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Deal with negative feelings

5 Exercise

Exercise releases endorphins, nature's feel-good chemical, which will move your mood to a better state. The paradox is that we often don't feel like exercising when that's exactly what we really need. Don't let those feelings stop you. Going for a run, walking the dog or even a playing a game outside with the kids is the very thing you need to feel better.

6 Distract yourself

A healthy distraction, such as phoning a friend, reading a novel or watching a comedy is a way many people use to manage difficult emotions. It's a highly recommended strategy for natural worriers! It's amazing how much better a situation will seem after giving your mind a short break from it..

7 Have constructive habits and hobbies

One of the tenets of good emotional health is that a person needs hobbies and interests that lift them up and make life enjoyable. Single-tracked lives – all work and no play – are recipes for emotional disaster. If you can relate to this, then I suggest you take the time to find a hobby or interest that juices you up. The same, of course, holds for kids. All work and no play makes ... well, it's hard to hold it together if you are feeling stressed all the time.

It's important that as parents and teachers we practise good emotional management techniques ourselves so we are better placed to pass them on to kids. The upside is that'll we'll feel better, make better decisions and be more effective as parents and teachers as well.

This is an extract from "15 right ways to manage emotions", a special report available at Parentingideasclub.com.au

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