

## Three Parenting Skills to Help Children Develop Emotional Intelligence and Resilience

By

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Since a model of Emotional Intelligence (EQ) was introduced in 1990 (Salovey and Mayer), the push for developing EQ has gained momentum in many realms, recognized as a critical factor in well-being and success. Given the complexities of modern life, the subtitle of Daniel Goleman's 1995 bestseller *Emotional Intelligence* seems both a directive and a warning as we witness daily *Why it Can Matter More Than IQ*.

No one influences the development of EQ more than a child's first teachers and role models: parents. And the most powerful form of learning is what children experience in daily interactions and rituals. Presence, trust, and the giving and receiving within relationships provide the space and substance of social-emotional growth. The parent-child attachment makes actions speak louder than words on many levels of children's developing minds. Their EQ grows within the family culture from the qualities we exude, our consistency in character, and learning from the ups and downs of daily life.

Importantly, these ups and downs provide the foundation of resilience and help our children handle big feelings, disappointments, and the inevitable times when relationships are not completely in tune. In these moments, children learn that emotions provide important messages and are not something to avoid. And that they can handle these big feelings until circumstances resolve or relationships reconnect. With these points in mind, here are three important parenting skills that support the growth of EQ and resilience.

**Stay with the feeling.** The starting point of emotional intelligence is awareness. Early on children learn to label and categorize, yet the key to awareness is the embodiment of experience. The process starts with the primary experience of emotions—literally movement within the body felt as a change in state. Emotions are the glue for experience and learning how the feeling is embodied helps children make sense of and make meaning in their world. It also opens them to the world of others as empathy grows from this reflective process.

While we are all emotional beings, children live closer to the source. Adults, because of their higher level of cognitive development, typically engage content, language, and attend to problem solving. That may be define many adult interactions, but in the parent-child relationship the source of EQ is providing a mirror for the child to internalize experience. A simple, "I see you feel frustrated," goes much farther in developing awareness and EQ than shifting immediately to advice-giving or fixing things.

Often children revert to stock phrases that call for attention but may not be related to the actual problem and feeling. Their face, tone, gesture and posture give away what they feel inside. While a child might say, "You are mean!" in the heat of the moment when a limit is set, it is far more important to reflect the emotions (frustration) so the child can connect the feeling with how it is experienced. Arguing that you are not a mean parent is to get into adult litigation that no one wins and validates that

there may be some substance to the argument—for it is simply word play. And the verbal battle keeps emotions high.

Staying with the feeling allows the natural rise and fall of the emotional aspect of the experience. The child experiences the feeling of the emotion and in time and with coaching can connect the internal message with the process: something happened (*mom/dad set a limit*); I had an emotion (*frustration*); the feeling had a message (*I don't like this*); The feeling rose and fell (*It's ok to have a feeling of frustration, but I still have to stop what I'm doing*).

Like all skills, staying with the feeling takes practice, time, and consistency. For young children this process is learned as an internal working model and part of the self-regulation process. Which means in heated moments parents should avoid the fire-starter questions that start with: “Why...?”

**Stay with the challenge.** Things are certain to not go our way as there is no escaping the ups and downs of daily life. Problems, while not always welcomed, can be framed beyond the negative feelings that typically announce their presence. While there is no need to go looking for problems, we can engage the challenges we face as something that will make us smarter or stronger in some way—for that is the lesson of experience. Some of our greatest growth started with a problem, and challenge is always at the edge of development. So why rob children of the chance to learn from the problem-solving process?

First, acknowledge the problem, the feeling and its message. For children (and adults) the feeling is simply saying “I don't like this. This is not what I wanted/expected.” Next, make space from the emotion. Then engage and focus on creativity and solutions. And don't be too quick to make it better. Stick with a playful tone (“I wonder...”) and ask, “Do you think that will work?” Then try it out. When a solution works, review the process and a simple “You did it!” sets the tone for the next challenge (which is not far off!). Remember that emotional resilience develops from staying with and going through challenges.

**Stay with the connection:** “Being with” is powerful for our presence says, “you matter” and is a building block of a child's sense of self and of empathy. Most of connection is beyond words and children learn from modeling, imitation, and the back and forth of shared attention. Mirror neurons enable us to experience each other's internal states. All this requires consistent quality time, face to face, and without distractions. Making the connection the center of attention is the heart of the experience.

The powerful outcome of staying with the connection is developing the reciprocity that relationships require to grow and stay true. Being responsive and present with your child says relationships matter. Importantly, in relationships we give what we have received. EQ grows from self-awareness to other-awareness and these intimate parent-child moments deeply engrain the mental models of healthy relationships.

To summarize, these three skills form the core of EQ and resilience. “Staying with” underlies each of these skills and is a quality that seems to get less attention these days. But “staying with” is at the core of these three skills, and what matters most in our lives.

## References

Goleman, D. (1995). *Emotional intelligence*. Bantam.

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### **About the Author**

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