

INSIGHTS

Parenting for emotionally healthy kids



Most people steer clear from using destructive, toxic parenting strategies for fear of raising dysfunctional, emotionally unhealthy adults. Living vicariously through your kids or using fear to gain obedience are the types of strategies most parents avoid. So, what behaviours can parents practise that will help their kids function well, relate well to others and reach emotional maturity in adulthood? These behaviours will help you lay the foundation for your child to become an emotionally healthy adult.

Helping kids tolerate discomfort

While you don't need to expose kids to pain just for the purpose of toughening them up, you don't need to shield them from discomfort. Missing being picked for a team, a friend moving away and sitting a test that makes them nervous are the types of situations that reflect real adult-life. Providing children and young people with exposure to such experiences and giving them coping strategies such as positive distraction builds their resilience, which is essential for success and good mental acuity.

Validating their feelings

Telling kids to stop worrying or stop crying sends a message that emotions are bad. It teaches them to hide their emotions or fight their feelings. Similarly applying the terms 'good' or 'bad' to emotions sends a message that some emotions are not acceptable. The use of terms 'pleasant' and 'unpleasant' when discussing emotions is non-judgemental and shows your acceptance of all feelings. Let kids know through your language and behaviour that all emotions are a natural part of life, and that they provide important information to help them navigate their world. "Ahh! I see you feel upset about this" is the type of statement kids want to hear particularly when feelings are negative.

Letting kids live their own life

Parents have unrealised dreams as well as unhealed emotional scars. It can be tempting to put your own emotions onto your child or steer them away from areas of life that caused you pain. This practice places enormous pressure on children and restricts them from developing their own sense of self that comes from making your own life choices and living with the consequences. Kids require a certain amount of emotional space to develop their own interests and strengths that may be at odds with your expectations, which can be challenging when parenting small families.

Being emotionally available

One of the most difficult and time-consuming aspects of parenting is sharing a child or young person's emotional burdens. Supporting a child who is sad, or helping a young person manage disappointment is draining emotional labour, requiring your full attention. Supporting, coaching and coaxing kids when they are down is when parents do some of their most important work.

In closing

Raising children and young people to reach emotional maturity is an often (unintentionally) neglected part of parenting. By paying attention to their emotions and responding positively rather than shutting them down when their emotions get the better of them you will help lay the foundation to live healthy, balanced lives.



Michael Grose

Michael Grose, founder of Parenting Ideas, is one of Australia's leading parenting educators. He's an award-winning speaker and the author of 12 books for parents including *Spoonfed Generation*, and the bestselling *Why First Borns Rule the World and Last Borns Want to Change It*. Michael is a former teacher with 15 years experience, and has 30 years experience in parenting education. He also holds a Master of Educational Studies from Monash University specialising in parenting education.