

Developing the Ability to Emotionally Regulate

Emotional regulation describes the ability to control one's emotions, to resist the urge to act impulsively or behave in ways that social conventions deem atypical. When born, infants have no control over their emotions, but it is for two good reasons. The first is simple and boils down to the fact that the brain has not developed the necessary neural pathways to resist the urge to let everyone know (by screaming at the top of their lungs) the instant they are hungry, tired or wet. The second reason links back to the first. The only way an infant will survive is by letting those who it is dependent upon know that it is hungry, tired or wet. Never in the history of man has more efficient programming existed to motivate adults into action. Needless to say infants' demanding natures outlive their welcome, meaning that adults, sooner or later, end up teaching children how to regulate themselves and find alternative ways to inform others of their needs and wants.

How emotional regulation is taught

Emotional regulation is frequently taught in a haphazard, subconscious way. Telling children to wait to speak, that they cannot have something to eat five minutes before dinner and that no toys or treats will be bought while visiting the shopping centre help to lay the foundations that teach children how to emotionally regulate. In simple terms, emotional regulation can be described as the ability to forego one's desires. Unfortunately for parents, children are not always accepting of this idea, meaning they will persistently keep talking until attention is on them, drop to the ground screaming and wailing, stating that if they do not eat something immediately they will die, or have a tantrum that draws the unwanted attention of other shoppers.

When children decide that regulating their emotions is not for them, the adult's job gets trickier. As such, they need to know what steps to take to help children learn how to regulate their emotions. While there are many different factors involved this article will discuss three key issues.

Allowing children to feel and experience all types of emotions

Emotions are wonderful things. They teach us about our likes and dislikes, they make memories and help guide us to seek experiences that bring us happiness. Naturally, to know what makes us happy we need to experience things that do not bring us joy. Disappointment rises from the darkness when something unexpected happens (i.e. not getting an award). Anger rears its head when someone or something happens that challenges our way of thinking or being (i.e. when someone challenges our behaviour or takes something from us). Sadness pools to make puddles of anguish (i.e. when a loss is experienced) etc. The reasons emotions surface are varied but they all exist for the same outcome – to let us know if our values, beliefs, hopes and dreams are being met.

It is unreasonable to expect to get everything we desire, but young children do not have the same perspective as their elder counterparts. They have not developed the capacity to accept that life is not always forthcoming in giving them what they want when they want it. The neural pathways in their brains remain underdeveloped for a long time, hence the reason they have no qualms about wearing their emotions on their sleeve. And while it might be easier for the adult to give into the child to prevent them from any emotional hardship, children need to experience all types of happy and sad, good and bad emotions if they are to develop the levels of emotional regulation required to survive this world. Only then do they develop the capacity to understand that disappointment, sadness and anger do not linger forever. Furthermore they learn to use coping strategies that help them through a plethora of situations. The development of coping strategies unsurprisingly helps them to overcome and remain resilient in the face of hard times throughout their lives.

Parenting styles

If children are to learn how to cope with and overcome a range of positive and negative emotions they need parents willing to let them. While there are five general parenting styles, not all are conducive to helping children learn how to face their emotions and develop coping strategies. At one end of the spectrum parents lie in wait to protect their children from anything that challenges them. These types of parents tend to worry about their children's wellbeing and develop unfounded concerns that if children are to face any negative emotions or situations it could be to the detriment of their child's capacity to live a happy life. Sadly, parenting in this way prevents children from experiencing the necessary levels of emotional discomfort to overcome challenges. Furthermore, these types of children are more prone to anxiety and depression, making them develop default attitudes and behaviours that make them avoid new or challenging experiences.

Located further along the parenting spectrum are parents who know how to fight the desire to protect their children from sad and challenging times. They understand that in order for their children to become emotionally resilient they need to allow them the opportunity to experience the full spectrum of their emotions. Success for them lies with knowing where being supportive ends and over-fussing begins. They are not parents who care less about their child's wellbeing, but rather respect their job is to teach and guide. In order to do this, they know that children need to be given the reins to see if they can make their way through the tricky times, always waiting in the wings if the worst happens. If it does, they lend a sympathetic ear and shoulder to cry on but refrain from jumping in and fixing the problem. This type of parent essentially has a strong backbone and a determined mindset that prevents them from giving in to children to stop tantrums, to make children feel better because they do not like the way it feels when their child is upset. They are able to rationalise their parenting choices and know that if their hearts rule rather than their heads, their child's resilience levels could be jeopardised. They know that nothing bad happens to children when they do not get something they want, that children do not tend to stay sad for long when they have a friendship fallout, or that the world will not end when electronic devices are locked up for the night. Another thing they know how to do well is cry and/or question their parenting choices away from their children. And when these instances occur they are always able to see the necessity behind seeing (within reason) their children grapple with their emotions from time to time.

Gratification

Gratification makes us feel a range of positive feelings. And it makes us seek more gratifying experiences. It motivates us to do things we like or are good at, to get out of bed in the morning, seek out friendships, do better in relationships, work harder to make more money, to avoid things that we have learnt bring us displeasure or hardship.

In today's society, it is much easier to feel gratified than it used to be. Gratification once required people to work for very little reward, save hard to buy something they wanted, and use their imaginations to create their own fun. Today's story is very different. We do not necessarily have to work or save to buy something we want because credit cards and Afterpay exist. We do not have to create our own fun because everyone else is creating it for us on Youtube. We no longer, like those who grew up when money was hard earned and spent sparingly, have to wait for Christmas or birthdays to get a treat or toy bought for us. Shops and social pressures make it seem like parents are doing their children a great disservice if they do not have something (food or otherwise) bought for them every time they go out.

Without the need to wait or work for things means that humans (in most developed countries anyway) no longer need to work hard to develop the neural pathways that strengthen their capacity to emotionally regulate. As a result, desire becomes our friend and patience is a long-lost relative. Nevertheless, if adults wish for children to develop the ability to emotionally regulate, conditions need to be created where they are not living by their desires.

Long-term effects if children do not learn how to emotionally regulate

Just because children get older does not mean that their ability to emotionally regulate improves. Instead, if truth be told, the older people get the harder it is to break bad habits and improve impulse control. When children do not learn how to face and overcome their emotions and/or face the situations that ignite them, they continue to look to others to fix their problems or blame others for their situation in life. Although there are many negative consequences of an under-developed emotional capacity some of the most disabling can include depression and anxiety. Additional consequences can include children developing an attitude that life is beyond their control to change. They can also find it hard to sustain healthy relationships. Children who find it difficult to regulate their emotions can be quick to fire their displeasure at their partner or friends because they no longer have a supportive parent picking up, guiding or excusing their emotions.

A positive light

A bit of a bleak picture has been painted thus far regarding what might happen to children if they turn into adults who have not been taught how to emotionally regulate; however, there is hope. Developments in neuroscience have discovered the brain has the ability to learn new things despite age, meaning that you can teach an old dog new tricks after all. Plasticity (the term given to the brain's ability to learn new things) means that all is not lost for adults who have not learnt how to emotionally regulate or cope with uncomfortable feelings. With practice adults can learn how to cope better and face adversity with renewed confidence.

The main difficulty when learning to increase emotional resilience levels is often teaching oneself how to push through the desire to suppress or avoid emotions and/or physical symptoms that accompany unwanted situations. While this type of situation can be managed in multiple ways one suggestion is to focus on micro-successes. For example, rather than focusing on the big picture, find something, no matter how small, that affirms progress has been made. For example, "I got upset like I always do" can be reframed by saying, "I managed not to get upset for five seconds". Reframing situations helps to pave the way to bigger successes, i.e. five seconds will eventually lead to five minutes which will eventually lead to ten and so on.

Ultimately having patience with oneself is paramount, including situations when trying to teach children resilience. Avoid the expectation that trying something once will yield instantaneous results. More situations cannot be fixed instantly. Even medication cannot make an illness go away after just one dose of antibiotics. Disregarding others' perceptions and opinions about how life should be and how children should behave will help eliminate unrealistic expectations. Eventually this will lead to the acceptance that emotions and unwanted situations are a normal part of life. Once this acceptance is reached individuals can build the necessary stores of emotional resilience – no matter their age.

Summing it up

We are not born with the ability to emotionally regulate. Instead it is a skill that must be developed. In order to develop the capacity to regulate our emotions we need access to experiences that force us to face discomfort, disappointment and angst. Facing these types of emotions helps individuals to learn how to overcome adversity and accept that life is sometimes difficult and unfair. Adults can give children a leg-up by letting them know they are being listened to without directly fixing their problems for them. Having the ability to know when the heart is getting in the way of the head helps parents to develop a backbone that will ensure children learn to face adversity and develop strategies to overcome the problems they face. Gratification is a condition that makes us seek out experiences that make us feel good. The more gratified we feel and the regularity with which we feel it impacts our ability to regulate our emotions because it becomes something we expect as a result of stating our desires. Children who cannot quell their desires end up having under-developed impulse control and, in turn, hindered capacity to regulate their emotions. The negative

impacts of under-developed emotional capacity can lead to conditions such as anxiety, depression and hinder the ability to nurture and sustain healthy relationships later in life. Despite all of these negative possibilities there is hope. Because the brain has the ability to learn new things at any age people can retrain their thinking and, as a consequence, their behaviours to ensure that they live happier and healthier lives.

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