

# Social Emotional Intelligence

## Cultivating Children's Hearts and Spirits

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Our experience as children was vastly different from the world our children face. Today's world includes all kinds of stressors that didn't even exist when we were growing up. Essentially, children growing up in the US will not only inherit the world's problems, they are now touched by them as they unfold. It is against this backdrop that the field of education in the US and elsewhere has still continued to deem academic competence, particularly in reading and math as measured by prescribed standards and test scores, as being of utmost importance. At exactly the point in human history when our young people need to acquire a broader set of skills and competencies in order to cope effectively with their daily lives and lead us into a complex and uncertain future, a narrow, inadequate vision of education is still being offered to so many of the world's children. Despite, and perhaps because of, the challenges young people face, growing evidence suggests that a key component in meeting educational goals for children, academic as well as social, is social and emotional learning. A growing body of research suggests that helping children develop good social and emotional skills early in life makes a big difference in their long-term health and well-being. In his groundbreaking book, *Working with Emotional Intelligence*, Daniel Goleman identified EQ—emotional intelligence—as being as important as IQ in terms of children's healthy development and future life success. He writes:

*"One of psychology's open secrets is the relative inability of grades, IQ, or SAT scores, despite their popular mystiques, to predict unerringly who will succeed in life. ... There are widespread exceptions to the rule that IQ predicts success—many (or more) exceptions than cases that fit the rule. At best, IQ contributes about 20 percent to the factors that determine life success, which leaves 80 percent to other forces."*

Goleman's work has helped us understand the importance of emotional intelligence as a basic requirement for the effective

use of one's IQ, that is, one's cognitive skills and knowledge. He made the connection between our feelings and our thinking more explicit by pointing out how the brain's emotional and executive areas are interconnected physiologically, especially as these areas relate to teaching and learning. We can build on scientific insights to help children master the skills of emotional intelligence. As Richard Davidson, founder of the Laboratory for Affective Neuroscience at the University of Wisconsin, explained to me recently, this kind of instruction takes advantage of a

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natural window of opportunity during childhood, when the neural circuitry that allows us to pay attention, calm ourselves, and attune to others' feelings takes shape.

Today there are more and more examples in the US of schools that are paying attention to children's social and emotional learning (SEL) as a basic part of their school's culture, structure, pedagogy and curriculum frameworks. This

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new vision of education recognizes that it is essential that we nurture young people's hearts and spirits along with their minds. Imagine a school where everyone in the learning community pays more attention to equipping students with the skills they need to approach the "tests of life" rather than having their students' school experience be composed of "a life of tests."

The emotional lessons about cultivating inner strength that children learn from the adults in their lives are powerful and long-lasting. When adults ignore their children's feelings, children come to believe their feelings are not important. When we repeatedly threaten or punish children for a display of emotion, children learn that emotions are dangerous things that need to be held inside and hidden—an invitation to later depression or rage. When adults are unable to show angry and destructive children other ways of expressing emotion and managing their feelings, children learn it is acceptable to strike out at others

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or have a tantrum to get what they want. Without strategies for decreasing students' anxiety, less attention is available for learning. For example, a child panicked by a pop quiz will actually imprint that reaction rather than recall information. Distress kills learning, creating a downward spiral of one stress reaction after another in which both adult and child are caught. As a result, kids can grow up with a range of deficiencies in key life skills that can trouble them throughout life, in their relationships, and at work. Freeing the mind from impulsivity and distress puts a child's mind in the best state for learning.

We, as adults, can't keep telling our children countless times to "calm down" or "pay attention" without providing them with some practical guidelines for how to do so. By offering young people sequenced instruction in social and emotional learning, we can help counteract the negative forces in their lives, and they can take these skills with them as they mature. Children who are well-nurtured and whose parents and teachers help them learn how to calm down when they are upset, for instance,

seem to develop greater strength in the brain's circuitry for managing distress and will be less likely to act on aggressive impulses. By offering children systematic practice in techniques that help them pay attention and relax their bodies, we can help them cultivate their budding capacities and facilitate the development of their neural pathways. Teaching these practices to students can increase not only their social and emotional skills, but their resilience: the capacity to not only cope, but thrive in the face of adversity.

Fortunately, many teachers are doing just that: teaching young people practical techniques for managing the stress that comes their way. A few months ago I witnessed this firsthand in a first grade classroom in a public school in East Harlem, New York. This particular classroom had lots of Special Education students who were very hyperactive. Their teacher, Tom Roepke, was getting them ready to listen to a specific CD—something they were very used to doing. The students quieted down and became still and the CD started. The man's voice told them to listen to some sounds. The voice reminded them not to name out loud the sound they heard, but just say to themselves what they thought the sound was. As they listened to the instructions, they began to listen with their whole bodies; for example, when they heard the sound of a bird, they moved their arms like a bird. They managed to not speak and stayed calm and focused for a full six minutes. The voice on the CD was that of Daniel Goleman, author of *Emotional Intelligence*. The words, however, were mine. The CD being used accompanies my recently published book, *Building Emotional Intelligence: Techniques to Cultivate Inner Strength in Children*.

In my book, I offer some practical ideas and strategies for adults and the children in their care to develop the ability to appreciate silence and stillness by taking regular moments of quiet time together, and as a result, become more skillful in managing stress. I suggest families and classroom teachers schedule this regular "quiet time" in order to bring balance, replenishment and calmness into their lives. On the accompanying CD, which Tom incorporated into his classroom, Daniel Goleman leads guided practices for children ages 5 to 7, 8 to 10, and 12 and above. With these materials, caregivers can develop some concrete skills in cultivating both their own and their children's inner strength and emotional intelligence.

Tom is one of many teachers who are part of *The Inner Resilience Program*, a nonprofit organization which I founded soon after the tragic events of September 11, 2001. Since then, we have been training teachers who, in turn, are teaching thousands of students how to strengthen the neural pathways that help children pay attention and manage impulsivity. Studies have shown that children's social and

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emotional functioning and behavior begin to stabilize around the age of eight and can predict the state of their behavior and mental health later in life. If children learn to express emotions constructively and engage in caring and respectful relationships before and while they are in the lower elementary grades, they are more likely to avoid depression, violence, and other serious mental health problems as they grow older. One of the strategies for developing inner resilience is to encourage teachers or families to create "peace corners" for children. This is a special place set aside either in the home or classroom where children can go whenever they need to regain their inner balance and flow. Peace corners can be used when anyone feels overwhelmed, stressed, angry, or otherwise out of control emotionally. Vera Slywinsky describes the experience she and her third grade children had with setting up a peace corner:

*The most astounding development of introducing these techniques into my classroom has been the children's interest in the peace corner. They have brought beautiful photos, postcards of warm and exotic places, and stuffed animals to decorate our corner. And they have not been at all hesitant to utilize it. Within the first week of its creation, I had a student whose uncle died after a long battle with cancer in Ecuador. Unfortunately the family couldn't afford to attend the funeral. She was grateful for the peace corner. Another child was evicted from her home. The peace corner brought much comfort to her. Her family is now back in their space and okay but this student was able to find a way to deal with those unpleasant feelings at school so she could in fact be more ready to learn. This simple addition in our classroom has allowed my*


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*students to seek peace amidst the turmoil they face in their lives daily. ... My children have collectively forged a safe place to begin to heal, survive, and appreciate the joy we have in supporting each other!*

When children notice the flow of their feelings, thoughts or sensations during the calming exercises, they are developing the ability to draw on that awareness at any time in their lives. When they begin to feel upset and overwhelmed, they may first be able to use one of these techniques to begin to gain control of their emotions and calm themselves down. It is a lot easier for children to talk about why they are upset when they are able to get out of the "stress response" mode. If they are able to notice where in their body they feel this anxiety, they can use their mind to let go of it enough to be able to talk about it and even think of some ways they might solve the situation or feel better about it.

In New York City classrooms and elsewhere, teachers are beginning to equip young people with the skills to more effectively be both aware of and regulate their emotions. And we are finding out that the regular practice of these skills strengthens the brain circuits that underlie emotional regulation. Given the busy, sometimes frenzied nature of our lives, reflective moments are often

missing. The more we can all begin to experience quiet and stillness, the more we can feel an inner balance and sense of purpose which can offset the overstimulation that is so abundant in most of our lives.

A window of opportunity exists right now in society for these kinds of approaches to make their way into homes and schools. Far from being marginal or irrelevant, attention to building our children's emotional intelligence and inner lives will help us achieve the equilibrium we all need in this chaotic world. It is essential for children to learn new ways to have their human spirits uplifted and their inner lives nourished as a normal, natural part of their growing up experience. What a precious gift children everywhere would have if they were equipped with practical tools to help them with emotional regulation as well as to recover faster from stressful situations. The benefits are far-reaching—from better health and an increased ability to learn to more fulfilled and happier lives. May we have the time and the will to give our children that gift. As Gandhi prompted, "We have to start with the children." 

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