

INSIGHTS

Developing young people's emotional smarts



The last few months has certainly been a test of young people's emotional smarts. The ups and downs of the COVID-19 experience continues to play on the emotions of all us, but for adolescents who are going through a period of brain development, this can be a particularly tricky time. Fortunately, parents are in a wonderful position to assist and in doing so develop emotional smarts in their young people. The following strategies will help:

Talk openly about feelings

Your young person will benefit from being around adults who talk about their own emotions and feelings rather than ignoring or bottling things up. A focus on emotions builds their vocabulary and also gives them permission to do the same.

- Talk about the emotional impact that daily events such have on you
- Ask them how they feel or react emotionally to things that happen to them
- Use specific terms for feelings such as 'irritated', 'nervous', 'tense', 'annoyed'

Build awareness of the triggers

Your young person may experience mood swings due to the changes occurring in both their body and brain as well as the changes COVID-19 brings. They may feel confused and even fearful of their reactions. Help your young person recognise the situations and events that trigger different emotions. Your young person may be aware that returning to school, for example, may make them nervous but they may not realise that they become annoyed when they're told to do something rather than when they are asked.

- Discuss trigger events and moments with your young person
- Make a list of trigger moments to help him prepare for them
- Develop plans to better manage emotions before they spiral out of control

Encourage journaling

Young people often have difficulty internally processing many of the events that happen during the course of day, leading to confusion and worry. Encourage them to keep a daily diary or journal so they can make better sense of events and situations that impact on them emotionally. Getting their thoughts and emotions down on paper helps them gain clarity, gain control of their emotions and build better mental health. Writing thoughts and worries down prevents constant rumination, which often leads to catastrophising.

- Give your young person the privacy needed for journaling
- Remind them that posting on social media is different to journaling
- Share with your young person how you process your thoughts and emotions in healthy ways

Differentiate between feelings and mood

Adolescence can be a confusing time, particularly when they're changing from primary school to secondary school. Feelings of confusion and self-doubt can seem like constant companions. Help your young person understand the difference between mood and feelings. A mood can stay for a long time – days and weeks – and is impacted by the lifestyle factors such as sleep, diet and exercise. Feelings are fleeting. They come and they go. They are easily shifted with simple tools such as breathing, visualisation and distraction.

Accepting discomfort

We naturally want to feel happy and content, however life is never that simple. Your young person is more than likely learning to come to terms with that. Help them feel comfortable with unpleasant feelings such as sadness, disappointment, jealousy and frustration. Let them know that there are behaviours that can't be tolerated such as aggression and hurting others, but there is nothing so bad that they can't talk about it. Introduce them to healthy coping skills they can use to make uncomfortable situations more tolerable. These include:

- Humour: having a laugh or finding a funny side is a great coping strategy
- Normalisation: understanding that you are not the only person experiencing something helps to rationalise thinking
- Distraction: taking a break from a situation if only for a short time is very therapeutic
- Compartmentalisation: stopping an event infecting all areas of life is a wonderful coping skill
- Goal-setting: finding solutions to problems and taking the first steps needed to reach them creates a sense of hope and momentum

Emotional intelligence is a skill that grows over time. It's like working out at the gym – those muscles will take time to build. Similarly, those emotional muscles will take some time to grow stronger. They may need time to talk about and explore their feelings, and become more accustomed to experiencing feelings, even those that make them feel uncomfortable.



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