

[emotional intelligence](#)

Raising Emotionally Intelligent Children

Looking to nurture emotional intelligence (EQ) in your child? Learn high-EQ parenting strategies that will help you build their empathy and emotional awareness—and set them up for lifelong success.



Why is emotional intelligence important for children?

Establishing respect for emotion is the most important childrearing task you have as a parent. If you and your partner treat each other and the kids with emotional awareness and empathy, your children are much more likely to enjoy strong mental health, stable, satisfying relationships, and a rewarding work life. Here are a few fundamental parenting

practices that will help [build your child's emotional intelligence \(EQ\)](#):

Remember that you can't convey what you don't exemplify. Your children learn from you— through your actions, much more than your words. If you can't communicate your emotions through your behavior, they won't respect their own emotions.

Try to learn from your children. Children haven't unlearned EQ as you may have. They make friends easily and retain their capacity for joy because they're naturally empathic and instinctively ready to feel their emotions fully and then let them go. So, listen and learn; you'll raise your own EQ and establish flexibility and mutual respect into the family.

Be on the lookout for repeating history. It's a lot easier to instill fear of feelings in children than you think, even if you try hard not to. Write a list of things your parent told you as a child—you might even jot them on a piece of paper and put it in your wallet as a way of symbolically keeping them in your memory. When you're tired and irritable, pull out that list and notice your own feelings as you read it. This reminder should keep you from shrugging off the warning feelings that arise when you start to utter these refrains yourself. Also, whenever you get a physical signal that you're dismissing your child's feelings, do what you can to observe your [tone of voice, facial expressions, and body language](#)—run to a mirror if you can. If what you find hurts you, it's also hurting your child. Periodically recall how you felt being the object of those words and expressions. Invoking those painful experiences is a strong discouragement to repeating history.

Remember that unhappy parents raise unhappy children. If you're exhausted and depressed by the demands of parenthood, your children will be depressed, too. You can't sacrifice yourself and do anyone else any good, so keep yourself healthy if you hope to raise healthy children.

Be quick to apologize when you make mistakes. Let's be realistic; you will let your guard down from time to time—we all do. Fortunately, you have a simple tool for ensuring that your errors don't do permanent damage. It's called an apology, and it comes in pretty handy throughout parenthood.

Using your own EQ to raise high-EQ children



No one can reduce the complexities of raising children, each one unique, to a list of simple rules. Through emotional awareness and empathy, you'll find the correct things to say and do with your child at any given moment. That said, there are situations that arise in virtually every childhood, from infancy to puberty, that challenge parents' ability to acknowledge the worthiness of children's feelings, without being manipulated by them. And there are ways to incorporate emotional intelligence into your responses to these situations.

The following are a few examples of how you can apply high-EQ approaches to the unique challenges that arise in your own parenting adventures.

Fear of the dark. Here's a typical power play that leaves EQ-challenged adults feeling manipulated, guilty, and just plain pooped. Has your child managed to secure a permanent spot in your bed because you can't stand to hear them cry, you remember how afraid you were of the dark at their age, or you're just plain tired of resisting? Assuming you don't want them in your bed at night, your high-EQ alternatives are to empathize (not sympathize) with the child's fear, and problem-solve together to come up with a solution that will suit you both: A night light? A change of room? Moving the child's bed to a part of the room that feels safer or is naturally brighter? How about a schedule that reduces the time spent in

your bed night by night? When your urge to protect is overwhelming, try assuming the child can handle his own feelings.

[\[Read: Childhood Insomnia and Sleep Problems\]](#)

Bossiness. When your sweet child starts acting up as so many children do at some point, the low-EQ response is to tell them they're doing something wrong. Because no matter what words you use, they won't hear you. The high-EQ way is to let them make their own mistakes and learn from them. If that doesn't feel active enough to you, you can also try saying something like "I don't like it when someone talks to me that way." Also watch for times to engage her empathy when someone else is being bossy and ask, "How do you think that makes the other kid feel?"

Temper tantrums. You might know this one, because it's been in every parenting manual: Ignore these episodes completely. That's a high-EQ response because it sends the message that you refuse to be manipulated by your child's upset. Children who get a response when they throw a tantrum learn unhealthy emotional habits that will only harm their relationships as they grow up.

Greed. Sometimes kids seem to want everything they see, including things they don't need and won't use. Tell them that greed is sinful and shameful, and they'll feel ashamed—and you'll never know what emptiness they were trying to fill from it. The high-EQ response comes from discovering what each person's unique needs are. Ask yourselves, "are we loving this child the way the child needs to be loved?"

Staring. We're usually in such a hurry to stop this behavior before it offends the person being stared at, that we confuse children about their own feelings. Don't hustle them off, distract them, or chastise them. Instead, acknowledge their natural fascination with those who are different from the children by saying something like "I know, that bothers me, too. What must it feel like to have to live on the street (or be in a wheelchair, or have scars like hat, etc.?" Then help your children understand that when our empathy is evoked, we act on it: "This is what we can do to help..."

Childhood myths. People who are ruled by their own needs regarding these fantasies always end up going to extremes, being brutally matter-of-fact about the Tooth Fairy and Santa Claus, or going to great lengths to encourage these myths. The child's needs should always rule here. Fantasy has to do with hope, and if a myth seems emotionally important to the child's outlook, you don't have to burst the child's bubble in the name of honesty. You don't have to lie either; by conveying the idea that belief and faith are personal qualities,

you let the child decide themselves when to let go.

Time Out... but for Mom and Dad

To be the level-headed, compassionate, and loving disciplinarian you want to be, you have to manage your own feelings of frustration. The following exercises can help.

1. Put your children in a place where they can't hurt themselves—a crib for an infant, or at a neighbor's for a few minutes. Treat this situation like an emergency—which it is if you've [experienced abuse as a child](#).
2. Take a shower and/or [a series of full deep breaths](#)—stay out of your head and focus on your body.
3. Sit down (a rocking chair is soothing) and focus on the physical experiences in your own body.
4. Breathe into your feelings until you feel in charge of yourself.
5. Some people enjoy imagining they're being held, cradled and comforted by a loving protective caretaker.

Emotional intelligence with adolescents

Adolescence creates difficulties for many families, because no one knows exactly how to approach the enormous changes that teenagers are going through. Children naturally pull away from you as they pass into adulthood, but you'll be eager to see that they get there safe and whole if you disconnect from your emotions. You'll need all your empathy to remain understanding when hormonal upheaval turns your adorable kids into unpredictable, irritable rebels. It also takes sharp active awareness to remain the source of security and wisdom that your teenagers will need more than ever before.

You can maintain a sense of balance even when [adolescence seems to turn your world upside down](#), as long as you've cemented your emotional connection with your children throughout their younger years. Mutual respect, loving acceptance of the inevitable changes that families undergo, and a constant [sense of humor](#) will go a long way toward preventing harmful splits. Here are a few high-EQ tips:

- **Give young teenagers a job or two that they can do well.** Actually, this is a habit you should begin earlier in childhood, but for preteens it's essential. If they are to become independent and self-reliant, they must have a strong sense of self-worth,

which you can instill by relying on them in some tangible way. When watching your children evokes a sense of energetic satisfaction in you, stop and pay close attention to what they're doing. Your feelings are probably empathic and will tell you what activities positively energize your teens. You can then tap into those to assign significant chores or tasks.

- **Don't get too hooked on being liked.** If it's important to you that your kids think you're a cool parent, you're answering your needs, not theirs. You need to be able to allow them to assert themselves in ways that don't affect the rest of the family's needs and rights, even if it means seeming to reject you. Don't let your hurt dominate your decisions. That's quite a balancing act, one that EQ can help you achieve through empathy and active awareness. If you find yourself repeatedly feeling hurt, ask yourself if those feelings are blocking awareness of your teen's feelings. If you find yourself constantly bending over backward to accommodate your child, take time to review what you need.
- **Always apologize when you've been wrong, even in small ways.** Apologizing when you've made a mistake shows your teenagers that you respect them as maturing people, it'll relieve their fear of appearing awkward or foolish by modeling acceptance of our weaknesses, and prevents resentments from piling up between you.
- **Above all, be generous with your love.** You can take responsibility for the buttons teenagers press in you, and continue to let them know that you love them—even though you won't permit them to do all the things they may want to do. In high-EQ homes frogs eventually turn back into princes and princesses—but you have to kiss them first!

Taking Your Troubles to a Listening Heart

Find someone who will agree to let you call and emote for four or five minutes when you feel frazzled by parenting. Because you don't want advice, but just want to be heard, an acquaintance may be the best choice, but a friend or family member who can avoid interfering is also fine. Not everyone is willing and able to do this, but those who are might appreciate your offer to do the same for them in exchange.

When you make a call, it's OK if you run out of steam before four or five minutes are up. Just keep expressing your feelings without interruption until you feel satiated.

High-EQ answers to teenage issues

“My son dyed his hair green on one side and red on the other” . . . “My daughter thinks I’m foolish” . . . “My son is disrespectful and rude to everyone” . . . “My daughter pretends she doesn’t know us” . . . “We find cigarette butts and junk food wrappers in his room” . . . “She’s on social media constantly, and it’s interfering with her schoolwork.”

If you have a teenager at home, you know why these complaints were lumped together: teenagers may very well commit all of these infractions before they’re through with you. The good news is that these seemingly rebellious activities are irritating but completely normal and, with the exception of the smoking, basically healthy.

[\[Read: Help for Parents of Troubled Teens\]](#)

When [teenagers act out](#), you’re there to love, guide, and model high EQ. You can set an example of respect for your body, teach emotional choice, and model the behaviors you value through your actions and deeds. You can listen with empathy, even when you don’t like the words, and send clear “I feel” messages when you set limits.

It’s important to stay emotionally involved with your teen, demonstrating that you care. But it’s equally important to avoid overreacting, which will only push your child away and shut down communication. Here are a few ideas for getting and keeping heartfelt communication going between you and your teenagers.

Understand why your buttons get pushed

You can’t hope to get close again if just being near each other sets off sparks. [Relax deeply](#) and focus on the intense feelings that flare up repeatedly with your teenagers. Allow the feelings to intensify as you ask yourself whether these are old feelings and what their nature is—anger, hurt, shame, fear? Most hot buttons exist thanks to emotional memories, so this exercise can tell you whether the flare-ups are caused by your teenager’s behavior or some old memory. If it’s any of these, you should now be able to control yourself better with your child.

Put yourself in your teenager’s shoes

Before you decide to ask your teenager to change some behavior that bothers you, analyze your child’s body language and their facial expressions so that you fully understand the child’s mood, and imagine the child’s emotional response to your request. If you image the

child becoming upset, think about what the child finds threatening, embarrassing, or difficult about the subject? In other words, how does the child feel, and how does this explain the child's bothersome behavior? The empathic insight you gain from this exercise greatly improves your chances of getting through to your teenager.

Find out what you need from each other

Directly stating your interest in knowing what your teen needs is another way to use empathy to bring you back together. Whether you're focusing on a specific issue or your entire relationship, you can negotiate with your child in a mutually loving and respectful way by having each of you make a list of three to five things you need from each other. Then make a list of the things you each think the other needs from you. Exchange lists, compare, and determine what each of you is willing to, given what exchanges you might make.

>Adapted from [Raising Your Emotional Intelligence: A Hands-on Program for Harnessing the Power of Your Instincts and Emotions](#), by Jeanne Segal, Ph.D.

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