

# ABCs, 123s and emotional intelligence

Getting our kids ready to succeed in school involves much more than teaching them to read or write. But often, academic indicators are where caregivers focus time and energy.

This means we often ignore emotional intelligence, which is a mistake. These skills correlate with success in the classroom and life. (Read more about this in our post about raising empathetic children.)

"In our quest for kindergarten readiness, we have filtered the research," explains Jen Best, certified family life educator with Iowa State University Extension. "We know that kids need social skills and emotional intelligence just as much as they need to reach academic milestones."

In fact, the 10 indicators of kindergarten readiness released by United Way of the Quad Cities paint a picture of the importance of emotional intelligence. At least half of the indicators - including expressing emotions, sharing and working in groups - have more to do with emotional over physical or academic development.

There are two parts to emotional intelligence:

1. The ability to recognize your own emotions and the emotions of others.
2. The ability to use emotions to guide thinking and behavior.

"Some kids just pick these skills up more naturally than others," Jen says. "Some need a little more assistance."

It can be challenging to teach emotional intelligence. But there are a few things we can do to help.

## Be open about feelings.

Babies are born with six to eight feelings, while everything else is taught over time. This happens through attunement - awareness and responsiveness to one another.

Attunement starts happening right away and often happens naturally. When you pick up a newborn, you coo and talk and respond to facial expressions and noises. This helps a child learn to respond to others.

As kids gets older, we begin to talk and name feelings. This is a natural way to help children become more emotionally intelligent.

And fathers are also an important part of this process.

"Emotional intelligence isn't a female or male thing," Jen explains. "It's a human thing."



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## Define before fixing.

When our child gets jealous, angry or embarrassed, we want to swoop in and solve any problems. We want to fix things and make our kids happy. But that's not our primary job.

"Parents are natural fixers," explains Jen. "But this isn't always a good thing."

So, when your kid experiences a feeling, name the feeling before you try to fix it. (And don't always fix it.) This will help your child develop the skills they need as they grow older.

## Help children determine appropriate behaviors.

Emotional intelligence is about more than naming feelings (although this is an important part of it). It's also about recognizing and working through feelings. It's about finding the appropriate behaviors for various situations.

Instead of focusing on what not to do when a child is angry, focus on what the child can do. So instead of saying, "Don't hit your brother," say, "Try taking a deep breath and closing your eyes when you are angry to cool down."

Giving your children the tools they need to work through emotions is a vital part of emotional intelligence.

## Model emotional intelligence.

Modeling appropriate behaviors is a vital part of being a caregiver.

You may think we're beginning to sound like a broken record, because we gave the same advice when discussing lying, temper tantrums, and talking about tough topics.

But it bears repeating because it's true.

If we want our children to be emotional intelligent, they must see it in us. So we should be able to recognize our emotions and the emotions of those around us. And we should be able to use the appropriate behaviors in response to those emotions.

We will all make mistakes, but we are the best role model our kids have. And if you have troubles with emotional intelligence, now's the time to find help.

"If you have an anger management issue, for example, there are professionals who can help you overcome it," says Jen. "Your child is a reason to stop the cycle."

You may be focused on reading, writing and arithmetic, but your child's emotional readiness may be an even more important indicator to academic readiness.

So focus on ways to help your kids identify emotions and act appropriately given those emotions. This emotional intelligence will build a foundation for future success.



*Originally posted on the Now What? Blog 6/10/15. The Now What? Blog served for nearly 7 years to*

- 1. Normalize parents seeking support and help as a manner of child abuse prevention*
- 2. Engage community in how they can work to prevent child abuse*
- 3. Work to build resiliency in families through promotion of the 5 protective factors*

*Maybe you coach a baseball team or you help care for the neighbor kids from time to time. You are investing in the safety and security of the children in our community. Because it truly does take a village to raise our children, we want to offer the tools needed to bring awareness and education to preventing child abuse.*