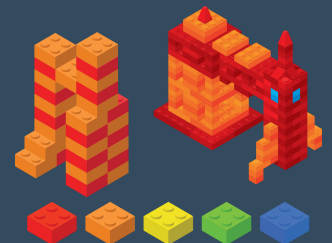


How To Give Your Kids A Happy Head Start

A Guide To Developing Emotional Intelligence, Confidence and Problem-Solving Skills For The Ultimate Start In Life.



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Disclaimer: Melanie Appleyard is not a Medical Doctor or Mental Health Counsellor. The information contained in this book are based on her research, training and experiences of working with children. The activities may complement, but never replace the advice and treatment of a medical professional. If you are concerned in any way about the mental health of child in your care, please seek the support of an appropriate medical professional.

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Introduction



With a huge rise in mental illnesses in adults and children, more needs to be done to protect our children from the rising statistics. The good news is that we can help our children from a young age by giving them the skills necessary to understand and manage their emotions. This is a different form of intelligence, known as emotional intelligence (EI) or emotional quotient (EQ). A child with high levels of emotional intelligence will not only be happier and well adjusted, they will have great interpersonal skills and will be more likely to succeed academically and in their future careers when they get older.

In this guide you will find out some of the recent mental health statistics, learn some basics about how the brain works and how this impacts on our behaviour and reactions, before focusing on four key areas which impact significantly on mental health and how we can help to develop them to give your children the ultimate start to a happy and successful life.

What Is Mental Health?

Mental Health relates to how we view the world. Childline describes it as being about:

- how you feel about yourself
- how happy you are
- how much you believe you can overcome challenges in your life
- whether you feel able to interact with other people.

Everybody feels a range of different emotions at different times. Some things make us feel happy excited or content, whereas others might make us feel sad, angry or anxious. This is perfectly normal and healthy. However, mental health becomes an issue when people are experiencing negative emotions most of the time and those emotions start to have an impact on their life.

According to the Children's Society:

- 1 in 4 people in the UK will experience a mental health issue at some point in their life.
- 1 in 10 schoolchildren between the ages of 5 and 16 have a diagnosable mental health condition.
- 75% of all mental health problems are established by the time someone is 18.

These statistics are really worrying, especially when considering that there are not enough services to cope with the increasing demand. Without appropriate support to help children manage their problems these issues will get much worse.

Poor mental health can result in relationship breakdowns, self-harm, physical ill health and sadly, in extreme cases suicide.



The Brain

Knowing a little about how the brain works can really help when supporting children to develop healthy responses to their emotions. However, it is important to recognise that the human brain is not fully developed until the mid-twenties. Until then the brain is developing, so the strategies suggested in this guide will help your child to develop the essential skills and start to put them into practice, but it will be a work in progress and will need to be implemented as a long-term approach.



Emotions are the impulses to act. They are the brain's interpretation of what we see, hear, feel, taste and touch. Every sense travels through our bodies, like an electric signal, which travels through the spinal cord to the limbic system in the lower part of the brain. The limbic system contains the amygdala, where emotions are experienced, and the hippocampus, which plays a major role in learning and memory. In order to rationalise emotions, the signals then need to connect with the higher frontal lobe, which is responsible for processes such as thinking, decision-making and planning.

The amygdala is responsible for emotions. It is the part of the brain, which produces the fight, flight or freeze response, which helps us stay alert and respond to danger. It therefore has a very important purpose. However, it would be very unhealthy for us to operate solely from this part of the brain. If emotions are experienced too intensely, they may get stuck in the lower part of the brain, causing irrational or thoughtless behaviours. Emotional Intelligence therefore requires effective communication between the rational and emotional parts of the brain, which requires a connection to be made between the limbic system and the pre-frontal cortex. This can only happen when the person is calm, therefore heightened emotions need to be brought down before problems can be addressed rationally.

Four Key Areas Of Well-being And How To Develop Them

1. Self-Esteem

Self Esteem is about how people see themselves. This can be affected by several factors, including how they are treated by others; how they compare themselves to others academically, socially and physically; and/or how they feel that others perceive them.

Low self-esteem usually results in low confidence. Children with low self-esteem may become very quiet, withdrawn and self-critical, or they may go the other way and develop behavioural problems such as refusals, distractions and perceived defiance. They may even become angry, defensive, aggressive and/or anti-social, especially if they feel like people are laughing at them or criticising them.

In their research into the impact of self-esteem and aggression, Donnellan et al (2004) found that:

11-year-olds with low self-esteem tended to increase in aggression by age 13.

Low self-esteem can also affect mental health and wellbeing by causing depression or anxiety. Depression usually results from negative experiences that have already happened, that the brain keeps returning to. In terms of self-esteem, the brain may keep throwing up memories of perceived failures and resulting consequences, such as negative comments from others, the feeling of disappointment, shame or embarrassment. The constant replaying of these feelings can cause people to spiral into a low mood. Children who are depressed may frequently talk negatively about themselves and their lives, they may self-harm, or even talk about killing themselves.

Anxiety stems from fear. In terms of self-esteem, this may present itself in the form of avoidance or lack of effort due to fear of failure or judgement from others. Anxiety is always a fear of the unknown – the ‘what if ...’ Often that too can stem from negative experiences that children are worried about repeating. Children often struggle to recognise, or name anxiety and it can sometimes present itself physically, as a stomach ache or headache. It should also be noted though, that some of the negative behaviours displayed by children can also be avoidance strategies, which stem from anxiety around completing a task.

Strategies to improve self-esteem in children is to see the successes in every situation and show appreciation for that success, no matter how small e.g. “well done, you put a lot of effort into that,” “I’m really proud of you. I like how hard you tried...” etc. If a child is scared, acknowledge their emotion, name it and praise them for working through it anyway. Show that you value the child, not just their achievements by showing an interest in what they do and by encouraging them to talk about the things they enjoy and the things they are good at. If you show children that they are valued, they are more likely to value themselves.

You can also help the child to see and discuss their own successes. If something didn’t quite work out, what was the positive in that situation? Maybe they learned something new, maybe they displayed an admirable quality such as determination or patience, or maybe they just learned something new about themselves, e.g. what they do or don’t like. Children need to know that often we learn more by getting things wrong the first time, so it is important to help them recognise that there is no shame in getting things wrong. The best way to do this is to let them see you get things wrong, without getting upset. Show them how you also make mistakes and identify the positives from it or put it into perspective. This could be as simple as spilling a drink, saying “never mind” and cleaning it up; or spelling something wrong on your shopping list, crossing it, rather than rubbing it out, and spelling it correctly at the side of the mistake. Children need to know that it’s alright to make mistakes.



2. Mindset

Mindset looks at how you choose to view the things that happen in your day. Have you noticed how some days things seem so much worse than others? Often this is related to your frame of mind and how you choose to view things.

In her research into mindset, Dweck (2006) identified two main areas “a fixed mindset” and “a growth mindset.”

If you are feeling a bit fed up, things will always seem to conspire against you – “the bus is always late when I’m in a rush,” “I’m rubbish at my job,” “people don’t like me,” “I can’t afford nice things.” These are examples of what Dweck calls a ‘fixed mindset’. It’s looking at your problems rigidly, as though they are fixed and there is no way to do anything about them.

However, when you’re feeling happy these things don’t seem to bother you – you take things in their stride, accept things for what they are and proactively work on improving things that you feel you need to get better at. The same things may happen, but you see them from a different perspective, which makes things seem so different. Instead of believing that you are rubbish at your job, you may look at what you’re struggling with and work harder to improve or seek help with these areas. Instead of feeling that people don’t like you, you might work on improving your relationships with people by talking to them more and getting to know them better. Instead of worrying that you can’t afford nice things, you might really appreciate the things that you do have and save up for other things that you might want.

Most successful people fail when they are starting out. A growth mindset is what makes them continue towards success. A beautiful example of this can be seen in this quote from Thomas Edison, whilst inventing the lightbulb:

I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work

Edison also stated:

“Many of life's failures are people who did not realise how close they were to success when they gave up.”

Every day in school alone, children are faced with new learning that challenges their thinking. Some subjects may come easy to them, but others won't. Developing a growth mindset around learning is essential in not only helping children to experience success, but also in preventing the poor self-esteem that accompanies a feeling of failure.

You can help children to develop a growth mindset by challenging and helping them overcome any rigid thoughts that they may have. "I can't do this!" can be challenged by naming and empathizing with the emotion of frustration and looking at a resolution together e.g. "It's really hard when you're just starting out and I can see your getting frustrated. Why don't we look at it together or set some time aside to practice it a bit more?"

A child who learns easily and decides that they don't need to put any effort in because they already find things easy also has a fixed mindset, which can ultimately prevent them from achieving their potential. Encouraging children with this mindset to challenge themselves and learn that it's alright to get things wrong will support their growth and help to prevent a fear of failure from developing.

Supporting all children to challenge themselves and see mistakes as an opportunity to grow and learn can really help children to develop a growth mindset.



3. Problem Solving



Knowing how to solve problems can be an essential part of developing a growth mindset and preventing issues from escalating to a scale that affects mental health.

Problems that we encounter daily are numerous and often require the ability to recall information we already know and apply it to different scenarios to work out a solution. Problems may involve using logic, creativity, emotional intelligence, inference and reasoning amongst many others. Here are some examples of some of the skills needed to solve problems:

- **Logical Reasoning** involves thinking through information logically to arrive at a conclusion, whilst ruling out information that is unimportant e.g. working out how many ingredients you will need to feed a specific number of people, or how to get from A to B on public transport by a certain time. You can help your children develop these skills if you involve them in helping you to solve these problems as you encounter them i.e. by talking through them and asking them to help you find the solutions e.g. helping you bake cakes, plan journeys, measure rooms for new carpets or new furniture etc.
- **Spatial Reasoning** involves thinking about shapes and objects in 3D and visualising how they will look when rotated e.g. fitting all your food in the freezer, objects in a car or using Lego to make a model. Making 3D models, using jigsaws and even tidying their clothes and toys away can help to develop these skills.
- **Creativity** involves knowing the end result and using your imagination and previous knowledge to reach the result you want. Again, making 3D models to perform a certain function, drawing, painting and role play can really help to develop these skills, as can involving children in coming up with creative solutions to some of your problems.
- **Emotional Intelligence** involves recognising how a situation is making you and the other people involved feel, as well as moving past the emotions to find a rational solution. This is an important skill in developing and maintaining good relationships with others. Reading together and discussing the feelings of different characters, role playing and talking openly about your own emotions, whilst naming and helping your children to understand theirs are key to developing the early skills necessary for recognising emotions in themselves and others. This can then move on to discussions about how different characters might feel in a given story or role play scenario, so the problem can be seen objectively and therefore solved rationally.
- **Inference** is the ability to read between the lines, seeking out clues from a situation to identify what the issue really is. Like logical reasoning, this involves identifying what information is important and ruling out information that isn't important. Children love to play detective, so finding clues in a story or game can really help children to seek out relevant information to help them solve problems.

Some children are better with some forms of problem solving than others. Developing these skills through early play can really make a huge difference to their social, emotional and mental well-being as they get older. Modelling and involving the children in solving your problems can also really help, especially with children who struggle to apply their knowledge to different scenarios, or who really struggle to take the perspective of others.

Empathy – Empathy requires the ability to recognise emotions in yourself and others. It enables you to recognise from your own experiences how another person may be feeling and so adapt how you relate to that person e.g. comforting someone who is upset or feeling pleased for someone who has just won an award. It also helps you to adapt how you behave in a given situation e.g. not showing your excitement for winning a prize when someone is clearly very upset about something that has just happened. For children to recognise emotions in others, they first need to recognise and understand their own emotions. You can help with this by identifying and naming strong emotions that the child is feeling at given times and empathising with them about why they may be feeling like that. Not only will this help the child to calm down and rationalise that emotion, but it will give the child the vocabulary and understanding to then talk about that emotion and start to recognise it when they next feel it. Siegal and Bryson (2011) describe this as a “name it to tame it” technique. You can also share your own feelings with the child in a similar way, linking it to how they have sometimes felt the same. The more you talk openly about emotions, the more the child will begin to recognise them in themselves and others. Discussing observations about how others might be feeling around you or in films and stories can also help children learn to recognise and empathise with others.

Non-verbal communication – This includes skills such as eye contact, turn taking in conversation and active listening. These skills are often picked up naturally by children through socialising with adults and other children. However, with the increasing use of mobile technology, such as phones and iPads, many people are losing the ability to actively listen when others are talking, which means that children are not learning this skill as naturally as they once did. Active listening is about giving the speaker your undivided attention and really listening to what they have to say, before replying. This makes the speaker feel heard and builds positive relationships. Teaching active listening will naturally support turn-taking in conversation, as the children won't be racing to interrupt or speak over the other person when they are talking. Their replies will therefore be more relevant. Looking at the speaker and making eye contact is another key skill in active listening, as it shows the speaker that you are listening and engaging in what they have to say. The best way to teach this skill is to model it yourself in your interactions with the child. You can also play games to encourage active listening, such as 20 questions, Simon Says, guessing characters from clues or giving the children instructions to draw or build something from Lego. Sitting yourself at the child's height will help in encouraging eye contact, though please be aware that some children, especially those with autism find eye contact very uncomfortable, so encourage, but don't try to force it.

Perspective taking – This is a step up from empathy but builds on similar skills in that the children can use their own experiences and others that they may have learned from stories etc. to help them see things from the perspectives of others. This is a useful skill in helping children solve problems and resolve conflict. It can be taught through role play, drama and through discussing the characters feelings and behaviours in films and stories.

Respect – Respect for self and others is a crucial quality in building positive relationships. A child with positive self-esteem values and respects themselves. They are less likely to worry about what others think and will therefore respect their own self-worth. However, by also respecting other people and recognising that their views and opinions are just as valid as their own they are less likely to take it personally and become upset if others disagree with them. Combine this skill with active listening and perspective taking and children have a great toolkit to help them resolve conflict fairly and amicably. Again, this can be taught through modelling and debating issues that are not personal to anyone involved, so children can learn that it's ok to think differently to others and that sometimes there is no right and wrong, just different perspectives.

Conflict resolution – It is inevitable in life that people will always disagree with you about something. This is just as true for children, though disagreements can be so much more distressing for them as they don't always have the skills to resolve arguments or deal with losing an argument. To children disagreements are very personal and they often don't know how to resolve them. This is where patience, understanding and all the skills previously discussed come into play. Again, debating different issues is a great way to support conflict resolution as it teaches children that it is ok to disagree and that sometimes agreeing to disagree is the best way to resolve conflict. Perspective taking is another key skill in conflict resolution, as learning to see things from different perspectives can help children find compromises that suit everyone.

Cooperation – Relationship building is also about cooperation, sharing, turn-taking and working together towards a mutual goal. Learning to work with others is a great way to achieve something that could not be achieved alone. To work effectively with others all the above skills are needed. You need to actively listen to the ideas of others to be able to build on and develop them; you have to be prepared to accept that someone else's idea might work better in this situation, or agree to disagree and let go if another idea is chosen over yours by others in the group. Turn taking is essential in ensuring everyone gets heard and perspective taking is key to seeing how other ideas might work.

Helping children to accept losing games or not having their ideas picked all the time, playing turn-taking games and activities and encouraging children to celebrate the achievement of others will really help them to develop the skills needed to work cooperatively with others and build great relationships.

Further Strategies To Promote Mental Health And Emotional Well-being

Meditation and Mindfulness

Meditation is a state of awareness. The aim is often to still the mind and slow down the ‘monkey chatter’ that constantly runs through it.

The first step towards meditation is being mindful. Learning to focus on the here and now, which can often be done by focusing on the breath and bringing our awareness to our bodies and senses. What can you see, hear, smell, feel and taste? What is happening inside your body? Are there any feelings of tingling, lightness or heaviness? Butterflies in the stomach? Areas of warmth or cold? By helping your children learn to recognise how they are feeling and how to be mindful they will develop the ability to calm down and rationalise their feelings more quickly. This is an important skill for children, who are often led by their feelings, without fully understanding them.



Meditation takes things one step further. Whilst meditating, you can transition from a mindful state into a deeper state of relaxation, where you are able to access a state of inner peace and calm. In this state you are also able to access your inner wisdom, without the influence of external factors. Guided meditations are very useful for people who are starting out in meditation and who find it difficult to calm the mind. They are particularly useful for children, who naturally have good imaginations and the ability to visualise scenes in their minds.

Meditation has many benefits for both adults and children alike, including:

- It helps to control and regulate emotions
- The ability to calm the mind and relax
- It improves emotional well-being by developing a positive outlook, increased self-esteem and self-confidence.
- It helps to gain mental clarity and self-awareness
- It reduces stress and anxiety along with associated tummy aches and headaches in children and cardiovascular problems in adults.
- It improves behaviour
- It reduces impulsiveness
- It develops concentration and focus, therefore improves cognitive performance and memory
- It develops greater creativity through improved focus and allows time to explore thoughts and ideas
- It improves sleep
- It improves health

In his book, *Emotional Intelligence – Why It Can Matter More Than IQ*, Daniel Goleman (1996) describes the biological changes that take place when experiencing happiness. Amongst these he says is:

“an increased activity in a brain center that inhibits negative feelings and fosters an increase in available energy, and a quieting of those that generate worrisome thought. But there is no particular shift in physiology save a quiescence, which makes the body recover more quickly from the biological arousal of upsetting emotions. This configuration offers the body a general rest, as well as readiness and enthusiasm for whatever task is at hand and for striving towards a great variety of goals.”

It is interesting that the state we experience through happiness is the same state we put ourselves in through meditation. It could therefore be argued that meditation is indeed a key to happiness.

Exercise

Movement is highly beneficial in many ways. Besides increasing the heart rate, it sends more oxygen to the brain, which allows us to better focus. It also helps to release physical tension and calm our minds, which in turn can help us to access the rational part of our brains when we are experiencing heightened emotions.

Children naturally need to burn off energy, so providing safe opportunities to do so when a child is struggling to calm down, can really help.

Exercise also releases many feel-good chemicals into your body, including endorphins, dopamine, norepinephrine and serotonin, which help to regulate mood. Regular exercise can help to bring stress hormones into balance, including adrenaline, which triggers the fight, flight or freeze response in the amygdala.

Positivity

Words have impact. We have already looked at how self-esteem can be affected by negative comments and negative self-beliefs. Positive comments can have the opposite effect and really help to boost self-belief and self-confidence. Positive affirmations can be repeated frequently to programme positive beliefs into the brain and help shift an individual from a fixed, to a growth mindset.

Positive affirmations can be found online, and they can be printed out and placed somewhere where they will be seen every day in order to reinforce the message and encourage the regular reading of it. Examples, which could be used with children include: “I am brave,” “I can do anything I put my mind to,” “I am loved.”

Stories

Stories can be a fantastic way of discussing emotions with children. They can also be used to explain situations and emotions that children are currently experiencing in a way that makes sense to them. Social stories are particularly helpful in supporting children with autism or social communication difficulties to understand unfamiliar scenarios and emotional triggers. Sometimes externalising a problem, situation or emotion can really help a child to understand and rationalise it, which in turn can help them to deal with the real-life issue.



Adult Influence

As caregivers we can have a tremendous influence on the development of children's ability to manage and regulate their own emotions, which impacts greatly on their mental well-being. Children often pick things up inadvertently through observations and experiences, therefore the biggest impact we can have on our children is through modelling the behaviours we want our children to learn. This means that we also need to be very aware of our own mindset and emotions, thinking carefully about our own reactions to people, events and situations. If you are not in control of your own emotions, it's best to walk away and address issues when you have regained that control or else allow someone else to deal with that situation. No-one is perfect and we also need to remember that it's alright to sometimes ask for help and learn from our own mistakes. Isn't that also what we need to teach our children?

Conclusion

Given that the skills needed to teach and develop emotional intelligence are so vast, but very little time is invested in actively teaching about emotions as part of the educational curriculum. There is an increase in the number of societal pressures, which is resulting in a growing decline in mental health. As caregivers there is a great deal that you can do to change this and support the well-being of children in your care.

By nurturing the skills and language that your child needs in order to recognise, name, manage and empathise with emotions, you will help them develop the relationships, problem-solving abilities and mindset that they will need in order to have a happy, confident and successful life.

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Melanie Appleyard, the author of this book has also written an animal themed movement and meditation course, called LLAMA Meditation.

Llama Meditation is a 14 week course designed for children aged 6-11 to complete with their parents or teachers. Through a series of fun movement activities, enchanting guided meditations, meaningful discussions and shared experiences children will build confidence and self-esteem, learn how to manage strong emotions and improve their relationships with others.

To find out more about the course visit <https://llama-meditation.teachable.com/>



Teach your kids the skills they need for a happy and successful life.

With the rising statistics of mental illnesses in adults and children there has never been a more important time to teach your children the skills they need to recognise, name and manage their emotions, alongside other strategies to manage their emotional well-being and mental health.

This book looks at four main areas of well-being and gives you practical tips on how to support your children to develop these skills to give them the ultimate start for a happy and successful life.

Melanie Appleyard is a Teacher, who specialises in Special Educational Needs and Personal, Social and Health Education and is passionate about mental health and wellbeing. Visit her website www.learningfromanimals.co.uk to learn more about how you can support your mental well-being and that of your family.