

Chapter Nine

The Role of Thoughts and Emotions in Inner Capacity

Oftentimes it seems we have little control about what we think and what we feel. Given that this discipline comes with time and lots of hard practice, kids must perceive that thoughts and emotions change as quickly and uncontrollably as the Colorado weather. One minute it's 70 degrees and sunny. Then, over the next hour, the temperature drops 20 degrees and a hard wind drives snow into your face. The younger the child, the less control he has over his emotions. (The exception being the onset of adolescence, when hormones seem to scramble thoughts and send emotions into sudden squalls.) A baby screams with hunger. Until the milk enters her mouth, all she thinks and feels is hunger. A toddler denied a box of cookies at the grocery store sinks howling to the floor. He doesn't understand that his tantrum has more to do with fatigue, hunger, and frustration than whether or not he can have that particular brand of cookie.

As we age, we learn to train our thoughts and master our emotions. We tame those mustangs and hook them to our wagon and teach them to pull us in an orderly direction. Or that's the ideal. Some of us have more control than others. Some of us are better at apprehending our thoughts and emotions, at recognizing when they're destructive, and at modifying them. In case you didn't know it, you *can* change the way you think about things. And to some degree, you can amend the way you respond emotionally. Plus, you can exact emotional control without the stiff upper lip and stuffed shirt. And, best of all, you can teach your child how to do the same.

We'll start out by discussing the mental attributes that boost resilience. The foundations for our thinking habits become established by middle childhood and have strong and enduring effects. Don't worry if you or your child has acquired ways of thinking that might undermine mental health. A little will power can revamp many an old habit.

Mental Mediators: Change Your Child's Mind - Positive Mental Attitude

Kids with positive mental attitude see situations (even difficult situations) as opportunities not threats. They see mistakes, not as horrible failures, but as learning experiences. Full of hope and optimism, they pull up their bootstraps (or lace up their sneakers) and continue onward.

Rather than expecting too much of your child, expect him to make mistakes. Help him see the silver lining. If he's young, you can point out the take-home message. "I guess you learned that trying to flush your dad's socks down the toilet causes water to back up onto the floor. Let's talk about the other things that don't belong in the toilet. Can you think of some? That's right. Putting your hamster in the toilet is not a good idea."

If he's older, you might sympathize with his predicament and ask him if he can salvage anything good from it. Allow him for your help with uncomfortable or disappointing situations and view advice as a means to improve his skills and increase his chances for future success.

Lots of studies have shown that people who think positively live longer. One positive mental trait is optimism, an attribute so powerful it can improve longevity in people who have had heart attacks and cancer. The fictitious character Pollyanna is the consummate positive thinker. Any child who plants a garden, takes music lessons, or runs for class officer engages in an act of hope.

As an exercise into the power of positive thought, psychologist Debra Danner and colleagues from the University of Kentucky in Lexington analyzed autobiographies written by a group of Catholic nuns more than sixty years ago. Nuns who penned a greater number of positive emotion words lived about ten and a half years longer than the nuns whose life stories were more neutral or negative.¹

The benefit of optimism also extends to mental health. Psychiatrist Aaron T. Beck, M.D. believes that catastrophic or negative thinking is the root cause of the low mood, listlessness, and physical symptoms associated with depression. He developed cognitive therapy as a means to transform pessimistic and hopeless attitudes to more neutral or positive thinking. Research has since confirmed that such therapy benefits depression.

By way of example, I'll give two ways a child might mentally react to the same

situation. Let's say an eighth-grade girl named Heather, who usually gets 'As,' receives a 'B' on a math test. The sight of the 'B' triggers a fit of negative thinking: *A 'B!' Oh, no. This was a big test. I'll probably get a 'B' in the class. I should have studied harder. I am so stupid. I can't do math. My dad is going to kill me.* (She pictures him yelling at her. Her heart pounds in her ears and her palms begin to sweat.) *This B will bring down my grade-point average. That means I won't get into Smartypants High School. If I don't, I'll never get into a good college.* (She sees herself standing behind a greasy grille, wielding a spatula, and wearing a dirty apron and silly hat with a fast-food logo on it.)

Now let's endow Heather with more positive thinking habits. She looks at her test and thinks, *Oh, a 'B.' I was hoping for an 'A.'* *But the soccer game the night before left little time for studying. That's okay. A 'B' isn't bad. And I can make sure I understand what I did wrong on this test. That way, I can get this material down for the final exam.* After class, she asks a friend who's particularly good at math if the two of them might study together before the final.

A child who changes her way of thinking can, in turn, alter her emotions and the physical symptoms that accompany those emotions. Notice that the first response to the math grade extends beyond the here and now to future academic and economic failure. The B is not just a single grade but a ticket to lifelong calamity. In the second scenario, Heather thinks briefly about the significance of that test grade (recognizing it's not a bad grade at that), then takes active steps to do better next time.

My friend Eric Larson teaches at a high-school for high-risk teens in Fort Collins, Colorado. He has developed a program that educates kids about managing their moods, including their anger and improving their communication and problem-solving skills. His fundamental premise is that positive mental attitude helps his students remain engaged in school and be otherwise successful.

Fortunately positive attitude is a skill kids (and adults) can learn. Because kids learn most things second-hand from parents and other important adults, the first step is to make sure your thinking is optimistic and hopeful. When you're with your child, try to find positive things to say. If it's pouring rain, mention not that you abhor

gray skies, but that you enjoy hearing the rain on the roof. If it's time to do the laundry (and you hope to enlist your child's help), say that you find folding clothes relaxing and why don't the two of you listen to your child's favorite CD while you fold. Even if you're upset about something that happened, there's usually a chance to wrap it up with, "Well, the good news is..." And the good news is, at the very least, that you learned something from that experience and that things are bound to improve. Soon, he will look for silver linings.

When your child is upset about something, help him see that the glass is half full and that most problems have a solution. Let's say she spills her glass of orange juice. The glass breaks and juice spreads from the table onto the floor. She begins to cry and accuses herself of being a klutz. You say (without sarcasm or anger) that accidents happen and there's no point crying over spilt juice. You suggest she get a couple rags and clean up the mess. If it's too big a job for her to do alone, you offer to help. While you and she mop, you tell her a funny story of something you broke when you were a kid. After she finishes cleaning up, you thank her for being responsible for her own messes. You say it's about time someone cleaned the floor. Now it looks better than ever.

Lighten Up: Humor is an Attitude Asset

Humor is a great way to dispel gloom and make a situation seem less overwhelming. The ensuing laughter is one of the best ways we know to relieve tension. Even babies possess a sense of humor. Nurture that talent. Studies show that people who use humor to cope with stress are more psychologically healthy and less prone to depression. Kids who have a highly developed sense of humor usually make friends more easily than those who don't. Studies confirm that intuitively obvious fact and also that they do better in school. Funny kids also possess the mental flexibility and creativity to think of solutions to problems.²

I use humor to evaporate tension and improve communication with my young patients. Sometimes the more difficult the situation the more therapeutic humor becomes. For instance, most people who attend a funeral hope that the eulogist will share stories about the deceased that provoke laughter as well as tears. The

laughter reminds them of the past good times and offers hope that more are in store.

So how do you instill in your child a sense of humor? Tell jokes. (Your child will give you feedback if you're trying too hard.) Laugh at your mistakes (but don't laugh *at* other people and their mistakes). Rent funny movies (as distinguished from movies that are simply crass). Listen to old Bill Cosby recordings. Watch Monty Python clips. My daughter and I (the female half of this writing duo) watch "The Gilmore Girls" together on light-homework Tuesdays. If your child is roughly eight to twelve years old, read aloud with him *Nicobobinus* by former Monty Python member Terry Jones, *The BFG* by Roald Dahl, or *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole, Aged 13 ¾* by Sue Townsend. Middle-school kids often enjoy the zany humor of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* and its sequels by Douglas Adams. Buy your child joke books. Download jokes off the Internet (avoiding those making various ethnic groups or races the butt of the joke). Hang out with funny people. Laugh at your child's attempts at humors. Tell him how much his sense of humor lightens your own load.

Actions Speak Volumes: Self-efficacy and Internal Locus of Control

Imagine if Franklin Delano Roosevelt had said to himself, "Gee, I'd really like to run for president. But who ever heard of a president in a wheelchair?" What if Lance Armstrong had heard his cancer diagnosis and told himself, "Well, I guess my cycling days are over." Fortunately these people were not quitters. They had a resolute faith in their ability to go after their dreams and make them reality.

Confidence in your ability to take action in the world and belief that your actions will make a difference describes *self-efficacy*. People in the mental health business call this trait *internal locus of control*. Prerequisites include optimism, a healthy amount of self-confidence, and a positive self-esteem. Internal locus of control is not the same as being "in control" or "controlling." Anyone who imagines themselves in total control of their lives is deluding herself or has never heard of unexpected guests, illness, hurricanes, tornadoes, fires, car wrecks, and other accidents. People with an internal locus of control know they can't manage everything that happens to them, but believe their response does influence personal

events. Their happiness comes not from possessions or the adoration from the outside world, but from inner satisfaction, gratitude, and equanimity.

An internal locus of control helps kids manage stressful challenges and find mastery in the act. They attain this mastery because they have put their positive thinking into action. They make and keep commitments to themselves and to their friends, families, teachers, and coaches. They make good things happen. And for that reason, they feel a certain measure of personal control. Dr. Suzanne Kobasa A leading researcher on resilience from the City University of New York, believes that *control* and *commitment* may exert an even greater influence on health than purely physical or genetic factors.³

At the other extreme, people with an *external locus of control* feel themselves helpless to make a change. What befalls them is a matter of good or bad luck. They let the world happen to them. They let themselves be victims. They are doormats. They think, "Oh well, there's nothing to be done about that. That's how things are." People who are chronically depressed tend to have this kind of hopeless, helpless outlook. Winnie-the-Pooh's friend Eeyore had such an attitude. If it snowed, he would hunker down in the cold, think wistfully of his friends warm in their houses, sigh, and say, "After all, we can't all have houses."

Kids with an external locus of control see little reason to say no to cigarettes, alcohol, or drugs. They think, *Well, everyone else is doing them*. And they may entertain the subconscious notion that dulling the senses to emotion is easier than tackling their problems head-on.

Research by Stanford University psychologist Albert Bandura, Ph.D., reveals a correlation between low levels of self-efficacy and high levels of childhood depression.⁴ Indeed, one of the most damaging aspects of depression is the sense of being a passive victim.

A striking example is Christa, a 15-year-old girl whom I've worked with for the past few years. She and both her parents struggle with depression. One of her biggest roadblocks to mental health is her profound sense of passivity. She develops elaborate rationalizations about why she shouldn't take action on events in her life. She views these things as beyond her control. She won't take risks

because she is sure she'll fail.

Recently, Christa was telling me about problems with her high-school schedule in high school. Specifically, she didn't want a first-period class, because her chronic insomnia makes it hard to drag herself to school at 7:30 a.m. She had a free period after lunch. When I asked her why she couldn't change her schedule so that her free block came first, she answered, "I don't think that's something that I can change. The school controls that." See what I mean? Until she can change her attitude and sense of self-efficacy, Christa will continue to live in the shadow of under-achievement, low motivation, and depression.

Contrast this scenario with the response a group of kids at a Denver high school had to the September 11, 2002 terrorism. After they got over their shock and sadness, they decided to do something to help. They solicited talented musicians from the student body to play a benefit concert (and give the proceeds from sale of the CDs to the cause). Other students volunteered to help with lights and sound. Others made posters to advertise the event and phoned parents to encourage them to come and sold tickets at the door. They made a slew of money and sent it to the Red Cross. Their actions exemplify internal locus of control, as well as compassion and service.

The million-dollar question is: how can you give our kids an internal locus of control? The first part of the answer is that you must demonstrate that you are efficacious in your own life. If you have a problem, even a small one, do something positive about it. If the neighbor's newspaper blew all over your yard, gather it up. If a tree dies, plant a sapling in its place. If you aren't happy about your weight, you might say, "Gosh, I've gained five pounds. I'd better get back to walking every morning." And, then you show that you follow through with your commitment.

Let's say, you're out walking in your neighborhood with your child and notice a lot of trash. Instead of merely complaining about how ugly the street looks and blaming those careless individuals who litter (or lecturing litterbugs), you could suggest to your child that the two of you get a bag and pick up some of the trash. You could talk to the teacher about making litter busting a community service event. You can praise your child to high heaven for making the world a better place.

Positive self-efficacy is interwoven with a healthy work ethic. Martin Seligman, a professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, has noted that every adult generation since 1900 has had an increased incidence of depression. He believes the rise in depression is linked to people's decreased sense of self-efficacy that we possess. He traces this diminished self-efficacy to a steady erosion of the work ethic of earlier generations, which saps the satisfaction previous generations gleaned from a job well done. True, adults are putting in longer work hours. But, for many of us, these jobs feel meaningless and joyless. [xx Scott, I added this last bit to try to reconcile with your statement that we had exceeded the Japanese in terms of time put in at the office. Is it okay? Yy]

The situation is worse for our children. Some schools dole out good grades in a misguided attempt to boost self-esteem (when, in fact, undeserved accolades do the opposite). The poor economy has made it difficult for teens to find jobs. They have become *persona non grata*. When school isn't in session, they loiter in shopping malls and other public places. Many adults don't want them there, preferring to warehouse them in huge high schools. Consider times past (though not as far back as Dickensian workhouses) when teens were valued assets, particularly in agricultural communities. While excessive amounts of chores and homework act as stressors, the decreased emphasis on a work ethic for kids can undermine their feeling of mastery and self-efficacy.

Creative Problem Solving

Creative problem solving flows naturally from positive mental attitude and an internal locus of control. Without a positive mental attitude, kids aren't optimistic about their ability to solve problems. Without an internal locus of control, they don't see the point of trying out possible solutions because they lack the faith that their actions will have much impact. Children with sunny outlooks and can-do attitudes spontaneously work to solve their own problems. All the adults in their lives need do is recognize these abilities as they occur and support their development and progression.

Let's say that your child is reluctant to make that transition and wants to

depend overmuch on you. In that case, target small, eminently solvable problems. Help your child identify the problem. Ask him to tell you what he thinks about it. What caused it? What might make it go away? Sometimes simply talking about it will help him figure out what's wrong and how to fix it. If he hasn't a clue, ask if he wants you to brainstorm with him. You hint at suggestions and hope he flushes them out. Now, let him pick the option he likes best. Praise his creativity. Tell him you think he can take it from there. Tell him if he needs your support (e.g., driving her someplace, loaning her money, helping her acquire supplies), you're there for him.

Of course, you have to be realistic about your child's abilities. Two toddlers tugging at the same teddy bear are thinking a whole lot about what's going on. That is, each child is thinking only of how much he wants that bear. To them, the only obvious solution is to fight about it. How can you open their eyes?

You might start with stating your observation. "I see two kids fighting. Stop for a minute, okay. I'm going to hold the bear till we figure out what to do. Any ideas?" Each child's idea is that they should get the bear, period. At this age, you may have to come up with possible solutions. You say, "Both of you really like this bear. Is that right? How can we resolve this? Cut the bear in half? Don't worry I won't. Should one of you play with it for ten minutes, then let the other person have it for ten minutes? Or would it better if I just put the bear away for a while?"

Older kids will have an easier time identifying and verbalizing a problem and then coming up with solutions. If your child is in conflict, you can hear your observations. "I see that you're having trouble getting up in the morning. I'll bet you're tired of me and dad bugging you about being late."

Your child nods ruefully.

"What are your ideas about what to do about that?" you ask.

Your child says, "Well, if you or dad drove me, I wouldn't have to take the bus. That way, I could sleep in a little later."

"That's a thought, but it's not always possible for us to drive you. I have a couple other ideas. Do you want to hear them?"

Your child picks the solution she prefers. Maybe, you hold out the proverbial

carrot. Her reward for getting up on time four days in a row, is that you drive her on the fifth day.

Emotional Mediators: Taming the Wild Horses

As difficult as it sounds, we have a choice about how to react emotionally to different situations. Becoming angry over a traffic jam won't get you to your appointment any faster, right? And if it's hard for us adults to learn this lesson, imagine how tough it is for our children. Aside from saving face in public, dealing with emotions is important for mental health. A child's sense of self develops not simply from the things that happen to her, but, more importantly, from her emotional response to those events. (And if you're there, your response will form the template for her own.) Emotions color these experiences and determine the meaning and value kids attribute to them. Life is either a bowl full of cherries or of lemons. The sense of self that comes together for each child eventually becomes her lifeboat. If that boat is buoyant and well-constructed, she'll glide over any sea of trouble. If it's fragile and leaky, she'll find herself capsized in times of turmoil. Building a strong sense of self is essential to successful social relationships. In other words, the emotional skills relate to the self and need to be established before that self can go out and relate successfully to others.

Emotional Awareness and Sensitivity

Before a child can develop skills that relate to his emotional life, he must first know what his emotions are. We all have varying abilities to tune into our own emotions and those of others. The first is an emotional skill, the second a social skill. In his 1983 benchmark book, *Frames of Mind: The Theories of Multiple Intelligences*, psychologist Howard Gardner termed the first intra-personal skills, and the second interpersonal skills. He identified seven separate types of intelligence, the two just mentioned, verbal, mathematical/logical, spatial capacity, kinesthetic, and musical.

Here's a quote from his book: *Interpersonal intelligence is the ability to understand other people: what motivates them, how they work; how to work*

cooperatively with them. Successful sales people, politicians, teachers, clinicians, and religious leaders are all likely to be individuals with a high degree of interpersonal intelligence. Intra-personal intelligence is a correlative ability turned inward. It is the capacity to form an accurate model of oneself, and to be able to use that model to operate effectively in life.

In 1995, another psychologist, Daniel Goleman wrote *Emotional Intelligence*, which describes the nature of our emotional intelligence and the ways parents can promote it in their children. The more traditionally defined intelligence quota, or IQ, focuses on verbal and mathematical skills. EQ weighs our ability to understand and relate to people. People with a high EQ are perceptive, sensitive, and connect well with others. Goleman argues that, in many ways, EQ is a better predictor of success and happiness in life than IQ. In truth, intelligence on many levels maximizes our chances for success in modern life.

Emotional sensitivity has to do with our awareness of changes in emotional state in response to events, situations, and other people. It provides the feedback necessary to make decisions about how to respond. Some kids have invisible antennae that keep them attuned to subtle shifts in their emotions. Compared to boys, girls tend to have a heightened awareness of their own emotions and also emotional cues from other people, a skill that can be both blessing and curse. The curse is that they tend to internalize pain and trauma, whereas boys (even when they're fairly clueless about their feelings) will externalize or "act out" their emotions.

Children with little ability to access their emotions do less well in psychiatric treatment. Mark Fallon-Cyr, M.D., a Harvard-trained psychiatrist who practices in Durango, Colorado, told me that he ranks emotional sensitivity and awareness as one of the most crucial predictors of treatment outcome. He described one of his patients, an eight-year-old boy named Bobbie with marked aggressive tendencies. Bobbie seemed blind to his emotional reactions to events and experiences. In other words, he had a low EQ. Despite Dr. Fallon-Cyr's efforts to help him gain emotional awareness and self-control, Bobbie continued to do poorly in school. Dr. Fallon-Cyr had little choice but to prescribe medication to control Bobbie's aggressiveness.

This ability to tease out and name individual feelings takes practice. Kids,

with a little help, usually learn about their emotions quite easily and naturally. In day-treatment and residential-treatment programs, my colleagues and I sit down with the kids morning and afternoon and ask them to assign a word to how they're feeling. We give them a choice of about thirty different emotional adjectives, such as happy, sad, mad, irritated, annoyed, hopeful, and cautious. If they use more words to explain their choice, that's great. In my practice, I also encourage my young patients to take time to relax (time in which thoughts and emotions come unbidden), to write about their feelings in journals, and to meditate (during which time feelings about things often crystallize).

What other ways can parents help children become aware of their emotions? The first step is occasionally to verbalize your own emotions. "I feel so happy I could tap dance." Or, "I feel cranky today, possibly because I went to bed so late last night."

The next step is to help your child match his own feelings with descriptive words. This process requires you to be empathetic toward our child. You read his behavior and also imagine how you might feel were you in his shoes. Basically, you say, "You look ___ (fill in the adjective)." In so doing, you help your child understand what it is he feels. If the child's behavior indicates a negative emotion (sadness, anger, irritability), you might add, "Want to talk about it?" Now, you're encouraging him to verbalize his feelings, without pressuring him to do so.

I have found another tool helpful with my own kids. When we're watching a show or movie on television, I point out excessive violence and say how it makes me feel. If the violence seems extreme, I will excuse myself. On one level, this action builds awareness and shows role modeling, but on another level, it makes a social statement about my personal values.

Emotional Honesty and Vulnerability

A big part of a child's sense of self comes from his honesty with himself and his ability to reveal his emotions. In my practice, children whose sense of self is damaged often lie to and deceive themselves. They have lost sight of what is true and real. They can't be true to themselves because they don't know who they are or

what they really feel. I've seen children so wounded by neglectful and abusive parents that they no longer realize how hurt and sad they feel. Those core emotions have become buried under layers of anger and defensive posturing. Seeing the world as a threatening place, they're standard reaction is aggressive and hostile. Usually, their first step in psychological healing comes when they unearth those deep feelings. The second comes when they begin to trust people enough to reveal their true emotions.

When you think about it, most of our negative feelings come from bad experiences with other people. Let's say a grownup walks up to child and says, "You are a selfish, spoiled brat." If the exercise repeats often enough, the child begins to think, "Ah, so that's what I am: a selfish, spoiled brat." It doesn't matter whether this child is actually kind, polite, generous, and considerate. She now believes she is self-serving, egotistic, and horrid. She may even begin to act mean and stingy. Because children rarely articulate their internalization of insensitive comments, adults may have no idea of the damage they have done.

If we adults remain mindful of how our words and behavior influences a child's development of self, we can help the child understand who she is. We needn't flatter and praise. We simply must describe the good things we see in our children. If you make statements such as, "I noticed you worked really hard on that math assignment," your child thinks, *I am a hard worker*. Your child gives you a story he wrote and you say, "I really like the way you used dialog. It made the characters come to life." Your child thinks, *I write good dialog. I think I like writing. I think I could learn to be good at it*. You say, "I enjoyed watching you at the dance recital. You looked as though you were having fun." Your child thinks, *That's true. Dancing does make me happy*.

Notice that none of these statements offered bald-faced praise (e.g., "You're good at math." "You're a gifted writer." "You're an amazing dancer.") Instead, they were factual, specific observations. Rather than telling the child, "You're great. I'm proud of you," these statements allowed the child to draw his conclusions and to feel proud of himself. They didn't induce the child to perform for your praise. They simply helped reveal to the child his feelings, helped him gain perspective on his

burgeoning self.

Let's say your child is not a very good athlete. Does being honest mean that you tell her so? No. Probably she is already well aware of her limitations. What you want is to help her see her strengths. After all, you are glad that she exercises, right? You might say, "You looked like you put your all into that game." Or, "You're great at supporting your teammates. They seem to enjoy having you on the team." In this way, you're capitalizing on your child's strengths (e.g., positive effort, good team spirit). And building strengths is just as important as fortifying weaknesses. Enhancing the former will improve competence and raise the necessary motivation to tackle those weak areas.

Another way to help your child learn about emotional honesty is to be truthful about your own emotions. I'm not suggesting that you *burden* your child with your feelings. Your child doesn't need to know that you're, at that moment, furious with your spouse. To do so would worry your child. On the other hand, if you are angry with your spouse, it will only confuse your child if he asks what's going on and you say that nothing is wrong. These false words will contradict the emotional climate your child so acutely and accurately senses. Better to say, "Your mother/father and I disagree about something. But we're talking it through." Such a remark is consistent with what the child has perceived and shows her it's okay to disagree with someone and feel angry (even with someone you love). You also teach her that the way to deal with strong emotions is not to deny them or yell and scream and throw things, but to talk about them until a resolution is reached.

In the above scenario, you were not only emotionally honest, but also **emotionally vulnerable**. By vulnerable, I don't mean weak. Nor do I mean to suggest that you (or your child) should wear your emotions on your shirtsleeves, nor "let it all hang out" with perfect strangers. In this instance, vulnerability describes the process of opening up emotionally to another, trusted individual. We ought to be able to tell our loved ones how we feel. We ought also to be able to say when we feel happy, sad, irritable, angry, loving, or anything in between.

Consider actors such as Charlie Chaplin, Audrey Hepburn, Katherine Hepburn, Dustin Hoffman, Robert Downey, Jr., Meg Ryan, Tom Hanks, and Kevin

Kline. Part of their success lies in their on-film emotional vulnerability. Their artful, subtle expression of underlying emotions is what makes the characters they play sympathetic and memorable.

We parents can help our kids by exhibiting a certain measure of vulnerability. We also show that we temper vulnerability and honesty with self-control over how we express those emotions. And we can help our children express their feelings. When your child opens up and tells you how he feels, listen carefully. Refrain from denying or devaluing her emotional assessment. That is, you don't say, "Don't cry," or "You don't feel that way." Instead, you accept her feelings and help her find acceptable means of expressing herself.

Self-Acceptance

Not only should you accept your child's feelings, but also you should encourage her to accept them herself. Without self-acceptance, a child can't be emotionally honest or vulnerable. It's simply too painful. If a child imagines that what she feels is shameful or disgusting, why on earth would she tell anyone? Better to hide those emotions from the world, and eventually from herself.

Self-acceptance doesn't require a child to think she's perfect. I've known children with severe physical handicaps and developmental disabilities who are at peace with themselves and their place in the world. And I've known handsome, athletic, and brilliant kids whose self-loathing crippled them psychologically.

Let's go back to the recent example of the girl somewhat lacking in athletic prowess. Regardless of her innate ability, she plays soccer every fall and spring. Maybe she'll never be good enough to play varsity in high school, much less go to the Olympics. That doesn't mean she can't feel good about herself. If her parents were repeatedly to call her, "Klutz," or her teammates or coach were to tell her that she "sucks at soccer," those negative judgments might indeed degrade her sense of self-worth. If instead she hears that people appreciate her effort, spirit, and overall contribution to the team, then she'll likely find satisfaction in athletics.

Our parental duty is to help our children accept their weaknesses and strengths. There's usually no need to point out weaknesses. Most kids are as

painfully aware of them as they are their pimples. Rather, remind your child of what he does well; remind him that you love him, weaknesses and all. Show him you accept yourself by expressing gratification you derive from doing things, even when the result is not perfect. If you play a musical instrument, rejoice in your abilities, no matter how primitive. If you run in a race, say how good you feel about your effort (and maybe the fact that you helped raise money for a worthy cause).

The earlier we teach our kids self-acceptance the better their mental health will be. But even psychologically wounded adults can master this skill. I've seen it happen. One example is Jim. He's thirty-three, works in a hardware store, and collects model cars. When he first came to me, he had been depressed for years and tried 15 different antidepressants, mood stabilizers, and antipsychotic medications, usually taking at least three at any given time. He had worked with psychiatrists and psychotherapists. It was all to no avail; he felt awful. Tall and thin, he wore his baseball cap pulled down low. He avoided eye contact. He found it difficult to discuss his emotions, and, when he did, all that came out was how much he hated himself.

We met off and on for three and a half years. During my sessions with him, I tried acupuncture. I tried changing his medications. I told him that I thought the key to his healing lay in overcoming his negative self-image. I asked him to accept at least one thing he did or thought each day. He found this task impossible. I asked him to try each day to find one element of his behavior that wasn't so bad. He couldn't. Then his insurance coverage ran out, and I didn't see him for a while.

Several weeks later, he made an appointment to see me. He told me that he had been to a spiritual healer. Her deep understanding of him propelled him into a process of self-exploration that led to self-acceptance. He said he felt much better. That was the first positive statement I'd ever heard him make.

A month down the road, he marched into my office with a bag of medications, set them on my desk, and told me that he had stopped taking his medications a couple of weeks ago. Now, six months later, he is off all medications and functioning well. He feels good about himself and is optimistic about his future. Last time I met with him, he even joked with me.

Self-control

We've been talking on and on about helping kids get in touch with and accept their feelings. We don't mean to suggest that parents pamper their kids and encourage expression of emotions in any way the child chooses. Children need to learn that, while their feelings are legitimate, they should not let their feelings drive their actions. Otherwise, we'd all be out there clobbering anyone who made us angry and throwing ourselves upon anyone who inspired romantic love.

Kids need to learn to master their feelings, without suppressing them. Show your child how you handle strong feelings. Tell him that, while you might feel angry enough with someone to fantasize letting the air out of his tires, you would never do such a thing. Calmly and firmly let him know that, even when he feels so angry he wants to hit another classmate, acting out that impulse is unacceptable (and will provoke unpleasant consequences). Boys particularly need to hear (and observe) that there's nothing wimpy about transcending those baser instincts.

We all feel the occasional emotional storm, then the lofty and superior powers of our minds consider the best option for a response. It's almost as though "the Self" intervenes between our reflexive feelings and our primitive instincts to act them out. The self is what prevents life from lapsing into the nightmare of *Lord of the Flies*.

Sometimes the best response is to take no action. Walk away. Turn the other cheek. For instance, if another kid calls your child a stupid slob, your child may wisely think, *That kid makes me so mad. But I know he's hoping to get a rise out of me. I think I'll just ignore him.* Later, your child may want to vent her emotions by telling you about what happened (in which case you praise his maturity) or punching the tetherball or both. And talking to a good listener is a good way to defuse anger. That means that the listener needs to refrain from making judgements or putting the child down for those feelings.

If your child did respond by hitting that awful child who called him names, you can help her evaluate her actions (after she has had time to cool down). You might say, "How did you feel when he called you that name?" If your child can't or won't answer, you continue with something like, "I'll bet that boy made you angry. Is that

right?” Your child nods. You continue, “And you responded by hitting him. But hitting isn’t okay. What else might you have done?” As your child reviews her choices, you can comment on which seem appropriate. You can add that, next time she hits someone, there will be a consequence. You do this because the main reason to discipline is to teach your child self-control. You and she can agree upon that consequence, whether it be no television or no use of the telephone for a certain number of days or whatever disciplinary action you chose.

Of course, you have to be reasonable in your expectations. Very young children lack the abstract thinking necessary to project the possible consequences of a hypothetical action. They may not even be able to think of possible courses of action. For that reason, they let strong emotions “make” them do things. (A version of “The devil made me do it.”)

Kids aged six to eight are ready to learn how to assess their feelings, consider their options, then choose one, rather than just letting strong emotions make them do things. It’s like sailing or windsurfing. When you’re learning, you go where the wind takes you. As you become more proficient, you can tack your sail so that, no matter the direction of the wind, you remain on your chosen course.

Self-Love

Kids who are aware, honest, and accepting of their feelings, eventually come to appreciate and like other people. Kids who like themselves prosper. They also tend to attract friends. Self-love is the highest intra-personal emotional skill. It is not the same as egotism or narcissism, which interfere with happiness and with fulfilling relationships with others.

This process that ends in self-love begins with the love and affection caregivers shower upon a child. As he matures in a safe and nurturing environment, he gradually internalizes that love. Children who grow up around “caregivers” who abuse them, have enough trouble being honest about their feelings that they generally don’t make it self-acceptance, not to mention self-affection. For this reason, they tend to perpetuate the cycle of abuse and neglect. Without self-love, they can not love others.

Later I'll talk about the ability to extend affection to others. For now, let me just say that a child's outward expression of love is healing for her (and for the recipient). Kids who behave in a loving fashion light up the world.

How do you help your child come to love herself and others? By helping her with the other, more fundamental emotional skills. And by expressing your love in words and behaviors everyday. As the saying goes, "What goes around, comes around."

Recommended reading

Emotional Intelligence by Daniel P. Goleman. Bantam, 1995, (reprint in paperback 1997).

Raising Self-Reliant Children in a Self-Indulgent World. Stephen H. Glenn, Ph.D. & Jane Nelsen, Ed.D. Roseville, CA: Prima Publishing, 2000.

200 Ways to Raise a Girl's Self-Esteem. Will Glennon. Berkeley, CA: Conari Press, 1999

¹ *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, May 2000.

² Cohler, Bertram. "Adversity, Resilience and the Study of Lives" in The Invulnerable Child: 391, in Anthony EJ & Cohler B (ed).

³ Kobasa SC, et al. Who stays healthy under stress? *Journal of Occupational Medicine* 1979; 21(9):595-8. Kobasa SC, Maddi SR, Courington S. Personality and constitution as mediators in the stress illness relationship. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 1981;22:368-78.)

⁴ Bandura A, Pastorelli C, et al. Self-efficacy: Pathways to childhood depression. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 1999;76:258-269.