

Importance of Social Emotional Education

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“Every child needs someone to fall madly, crazy, fully out-of-control in love with him.”

T. Berry Brazleton

Healthy social emotional development is the foundation for learning in every other domain. Secure attachment, healthy attachment, positive bonding, strong connection – these are catch phrases sometimes used to describe an important relationship between a child and a caregiver, and the child’s developing capacity to form close and secure relationships. It is a relationship that offers a sense of physical and emotional safety and security to a child, a person the child can trust and turn to for reassurance when distressed.

Children are born into the world programmed to connect with caregivers. Infants take comfort in being in the presence of the people who are meeting their needs, primarily parents and child care providers. In their first years of life, children’s brains are growing rapidly and the basic circuits responsible for emotion, memory, behavior and sense of self are developing, along with the capacity for interpersonal relationships and the ability to care for others. Having a sense of safety and trust with another human being allows a child the freedom to explore the world, confident that there is a secure base to which he can return.

Luckily, fostering healthy social emotional development doesn’t require advanced degrees or money. Parents and other caregivers can nurture healthy attachment through physically and emotionally responsive behaviors. Personal style does not matter – it’s consistency that’s key. Consistency through schedules and routines offers predictability to children and gives them a sense of security. At the same time it ensures that their basic needs are met – mealtime, bedtime, toileting support, together time, etc. In addition, sensitive, empathic and consistent responses to their emotional needs, empowers children to learn how to manage their own emotions.

To be sensitive to a child’s needs, meet them at their level, physically and developmentally. This can happen naturally in so many ways. Communicating with children through eye contact, friendly gestures, conversation, and pleasant tone of voice offers the opportunity to establish closeness and provide emotional nourishment. Just letting children know what is going to happen next helps them to feel secure. And knowing what is appropriate across the developmental spectrum is extremely helpful. It *is* the emotional work of two-year olds to test the safe boundaries you have set! When you repeatedly and lovingly redirect them to live within those boundaries, you are helping them to learn how to make their own safe choices in the future.

Talking with children allows them opportunities to develop their minds through experiencing the thoughts of others. Give them a chance to respond, to share their spin on things, to tell their stories. It helps them to make sense of their world – how they got here, how they're connected. Sometimes when a child has just called your name for the fifth time in a row, all she really wants is for you to pause for a minute and listen to something that is important to her in that moment. Do it. The message you give her is that what she has to say is important.

You really can't love your child too much. Be free and sincere with hugs and holding. Engage in activities that your child has chosen, even if it's something you are not wild about. Let them direct the play. Children need to experience your affection at every age and every stage. Stay connected even during the uncomfortable emotions. It is a gift for children to know that powerful and negative emotions can be shared, and that they will be supported through the intense times as well as the easy times. Providing a safe place for children to express their feelings helps them to develop healthy attitudes about emotions. Learning at a young age that misunderstanding is inevitable, and that it can be addressed and mended, is an important skill to have throughout life. Emotional communication is key to healthy attachment.

Stressful environments have significant negative impact on children's sense of self and expectations of others, which can result in hostility, violence, difficulty in social relationships, and poor academic performance. Children lacking a secure relationship with a parent or caregiver spend their energy trying to get their emotional, and sometimes physical, needs met. Physically and emotionally responsive parenting actually stimulates healthy brain development that enables children to be emotionally flexible, socially adept, resilient in the face of adversity, better problem solvers, and have a greater capacity to learn.

Whether you are nurturing a newborn, trying to keep up with a preschooler, or sending your children back to school to learn about reading, writing, math and science, shower them with a good measure of love and caring. They may not remember their earliest years, but their experiences in childhood directly shape their experiences as adults. Raising children in an encouraging environment supports them in growing into socially emotionally healthy adults. To invest in children's social and emotional education is to set them up for success in the rest of their life.

Sources:

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