

Growing Emotionally Healthy Children

By Larry Deavers

It's been said that childhood is something you spend the rest of your life trying to get over. Without consciously recognizing the behaviors, beliefs and habits you were exposed to growing up, you will likely repeat those same patterns as you parent your own children. This is how so many family patterns, both healthy and unhealthy, are passed from one generation to the next.

You have probably noticed that you have unconsciously picked up some of your mannerisms from your parents, or that your own children are mimicking yours. In the same way, even without realizing it, we tend to adopt the patterns of thinking and behaving we see in our parents. So, how do we create emotionally healthy family patterns?

Avoid keeping secrets. Unhealthy families tend to have a lot of secrets. Do your best to avoid withholding information, unless it is really necessary. Avoid telling your child to keep secrets from other family members and avoid activities that you think would require keeping a secret. Teaching your child that certain things are okay as long as no one else knows about them is damaging to their self-esteem and to their future relationships.

Listen to your child. Ask their opinions, ideas and solutions. Even if you disagree with what they say, treat their thoughts and feelings with respect. Rather than responding with, "That doesn't make any sense," say something like, "I can see why you would think that. Here's the way I see it..." This teaches them that their ideas are worth being heard, that it is okay to respectfully disagree and builds their feeling of self-worth and competence.

Value your child's emotions. Children from emotionally unhealthy families are often taught to devalue their own emotions. Parents can be uncomfortable with their children expressing emotions and may view them as being disrespectful. While certain boundaries must be in place, it is important that parents learn not to feel threatened by their children's emotions, but instead see those as opportunities to understand your child and help them think through and learn to manage their emotions. This will help them learn to assert themselves appropriately and teach them that their feelings are important. This will serve them well in future family, social and work relationships.

Allow your child to make choices. Accept that your child will make choices in life that you would not. Of course, there are certain parental obligations to protect your child's emotional and physical safety and there are obligations that cannot be left to a child's discretion (e.g., going to school), but whenever possible, allow your child to make choices and experience both the positive and negative results of them.

It is important that children develop good judgment and problem-solving skills and this can only be done when they are given the opportunity to do so. Allowing your child to make choices within the bounds of your protection ensures that their consequences are not endangering their safety, while allowing them to learn from their mistakes. This helps build your child's ability to make decisions and exercise good judgment.

Recognize your child's need for independence. If the goal of parenting is to create a healthy, self-reliant adult, then developing independence has to be a part of the maturing process. This means that parents need to grant their child age-appropriate freedoms and gradually begin to give them more choices, as well as more responsibility, as they get older.

While you will always be their parent, how you relate to your child will change over time. To create emotionally healthy adults, parents must adjust their parenting to accommodate this growth. You will have to intentionally move from caretaker and protector, to advisor, to friend, as your child ages. This requires a willingness for parents to gradually give up authority and control in their child's life, particular once they reach adulthood.

In combination, these aspects of parenting focus on teaching your child to think for themselves, to recognize their own needs, to develop confidence in their abilities, to recognize that their feelings are important and that they are valuable individuals. These skills also equip them to recognize the value in others, accept that the feelings of others are important, and feel comfortable when others assert themselves. When they are able to achieve these skills, they will be more apt to find success in all of their future relationships, their career and their personal goals.

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