

The Link Between Emotions, Behaviour, and Learning

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by John Hoffman

Self-regulation is the ability to adapt your energy, emotions, thinking skills, social skills, and the ability to care about others according to the needs of a situation or problem.

One important part of self-regulation is learning how to manage emotions. In order to manage and at times control their feelings, children need to develop some specific skills:

- The ability to understand and talk about emotions
- The ability to recover from bad feelings like disappointment, sadness, anger, and frustration
- The ability to enjoy and benefit from positive emotions, yet control those emotions when appropriate

The idea that children should learn to understand and manage their emotions is nothing new. Poor emotional control has always been linked to aggression, relationship problems, and even mental illness. Most parents learn pretty quickly that emotions can affect children's thinking and behaviour, both positively and negatively. It's much easier to deal with happy children than disgruntled or frustrated ones, isn't it? But what's new is that we now know there is a direct link between emotion and learning.

To put it simply, children's ability to think and learn effectively is very much tied to their ability to manage emotions. Research has proven this, but when you think about it, it just makes sense.

Effective thinking, learning, hard work—even just getting through the day—takes mental, emotional, and physical energy. Negative emotions like fear, anxiety, sadness, boredom, and anger are a drain on children's mental energy. A child who is always dealing with anxiety or anger has to put so much energy into simply coping that very little is left over for learning or trying hard. On the other hand, positive emotions like excitement, joy, curiosity, and interest are energy boosters. Most of the world's great scientific discoveries and works of art came about as the result of one person's passion, drive, and effort—all of which was fuelled by positive emotion.

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Harnessing the energy that comes with positive emotions is not about denying or suppressing children's bad feelings or talking them into good feelings. Negative emotions are a genuine part of life and the appropriate response to certain situations. If a child does poorly on an assignment or loses a game, it's perfectly okay to feel bad about it for a while. And it's important for parents to accept children's negative feelings. You don't want your child to have to feel bad about feeling bad.

At the same time, we don't want children to stay caught up in negative feelings to such a degree that it interferes with the positive emotions that help them feel good about themselves and that give them energy and optimism to tackle challenges and learn with confidence.

Also, when we're talking about positive emotion, we mean helping children experience genuine good feelings, not just trying to make them smile when they don't feel like it.

As a parent, you have, no doubt, already spent lot of time helping your child manage negative feelings. That not only helps children feel better in the moment—it also helps them be resilient in the face of life's challenges. But it's important to share and talk about positive emotions too. That helps children learn from experience that good feelings not only make you happy, they also help you get things done.

There is one more very important idea to keep in mind about children and emotions. Children's emotional states are very closely tied to how they feel physically. This is also true with adults, of course. Don't you find that your emotional reactions are different when you are fatigued, stressed, really hungry, or all worked up physically? In children, those effects are magnified. If your child is having trouble managing her emotions, don't forget to look at her physical state. If she is tired, hungry, all wound up physically or lacking in physical energy, addressing the physical need (extra sleep, a snack, a calming bath or massage, or some physical activity) can sometimes be more helpful than trying to talk to her about how she feels.