

Emotional rescue: child behaviour forum reaches out



*Psychologist **Joseph Degeling** is the Director of Child and Adolescent Development for the International Grammar School (IGS) in Ultimo. He recently presented an IGS **Thought Leadership Forum** to over 50 pre-school and early primary parents.*

While the talk was targeted to parents of children up to about six years of age, the concepts and content are really very relevant reading for all parents. Here is the basic gist of his talk...

The ability to stop yourself screaming out loud in frustration during a meeting at work, to say no to that big slice of chocolate cake, and to work towards a goal, the end result of which is two years away are all examples of a very important set of skills – emotional regulation. Emotional regulation encompasses such skills as the ability to inhibit our behaviour, to soothe or settle yourself if upset, distract oneself from upsetting stimulus as well as problem solving. The ability to exert conscious control over your impulses, urges and emotions turns out to be a better indicator of later success when measured at the age of four than your IQ.

When a baby is born, its brain has a lot of work to do before it is all wired up – it's as if all the power points and lights have been installed in the house, but the wiring has not been finished yet. The latest evidence indicates that the brain continues wiring itself well into our 20s, with the frontal part of your brain being the last to complete this process. Just as the environment will influence the growth of a tree, so too does our life experience influence the development of our brain – our brains are plastic which basically means that it can change with experience. This process is often referred to as 'use it or lose it' – like a muscle, the neural pathways our brain uses more frequently become stronger, while those we do not use become weaker.

A child has more difficulty exercising emotional regulation purely because of the limitations their particular stage of development imposes on them. This is due to the level of wiring between two important parts of the brain's architecture – the limbic system (right in the middle of the brain and basically the emotional centre), and the cortex (the outer layer of the brain – where we consciously feel our emotion). Daniel Siegel in his book *The Whole Brain Child*, refers to the limbic system as the "downstairs brain" – responsible for automatic functions, emotion, some aspects of memory – it's responsible for keeping us alive and triggers the flight or fight response when posed with a stressor. Siegel refers to the cortex as the "upstairs brain", and it is the cortex which truly makes us human – it is responsible for our consciousness, complex memory storage, problem solving, predicting the future, planning events, and so on.

In order to control something we have to be consciously aware of it – babies begin to be conscious of their emotions from about the age of 6–8 months. It is around this time that the limbic system starts to connect with the cortex, and in particular some parts of the frontal cortex that are very much involved in emotional regulation – the orbitofrontal cortex and the anterior cingulate cortex. This connection is very slow to develop and continues well into our 20s. So, a child's ability to regulate their emotion depends on the extent of the connection between their limbic system and the frontal cortex.

When we are emotionally dysregulated, stress hormones course through our veins. While stress hormones may save our life in the short term, they are quite harmful if released on a chronic level, and can result in impaired immune function, limit learning (particularly memory formation and retrieval), and can even damage certain brain cells and systems.

So how is this relevant to us as parents? Initially we are responsible for regulating our child's emotion – when our children were babies we would cuddle them, kiss them, look into their eyes, empathise with them, talk to them in

soothing tones, distract them or sing a lullaby to help soothe them. As children experience this cycle of emotional dysregulation and parent soothing, they begin to internalise (from you) the programming required to start to do this by themselves. You are actively helping their brain to wire up – the more our children experience this from us, the better these skills will develop. On a biological level, when we do this as parents we are also helping to reduce the amount of stress hormones released, which means that the child can then go on and explore the world – i.e. learn and develop – quicker and more efficiently. As our children grow up, the ways in which we help them self-regulate change – we may still be very physically present to help soothe them, but we may also start to help them use more abstract cognitive strategies like problem solving, or encourage them to do other things to cope like exercise, listening to music, yoga and so on.

So what are the key parenting practices to take from this?

- As parents we are largely responsible for the environment within which children grow up: A *safe, secure and predictable environment where parents are nurturing, responsive and involved* with their children will complement their developing brains, and in particular their ability to regulate their emotions;
- *Is our child's "out of control behaviour" due to "out of control emotions"?* if so, then before we can help them do anything else, or even impose a consequence we need to connect with their emotion, and help them self-regulate – they are certainly not going to learn from this experience if they are stressed, angry, sad or anxious ;
- Take the time to *hear their story* if they are really distressed – listen to them and help them understand the emotion within it by reflecting back to them the emotion you can hear: e.g. “that was really stressful wasn't it”;
- Once you have connected with their emotion, help them integrate some logic into their story – do they have it right? Are there other ways to think about this? What would be some possible explanations for the reasons behind their distress?
- Set clear and consistent expectations of behaviour – they do provide security to children and are important to their overall development as they help them internalise boundaries that will help them govern their own behaviour;
- Managing your own emotions is important as it is a way in which we program our children through modelling to cope with their own feelings. It is also good to explicitly teach our kids how to cope – “what if we go for a walk”, or “let's listen to some music together”, or “what if we go play with the dog”;
- Don't rescue kids from difficult circumstances, otherwise they will not get a chance to develop their skills in managing their emotion. It is important to learn that when things get bad, we can cope, that those feelings won't last long, and that we will be okay again soon;
- Help them start to think of how other people feel by playing board games, scheduling fun activities together, or reflecting on shared experiences after they have happened;
- Look after yourself! Take some time out so that you're in more of a position to manage your feelings and emotions when the kids start to frustrate you! Make it a practice to do regular exercise, get enough sleep, and so on.

Ends

Images: Joseph Degeling; Presenting on 18 May at IGS

Media contact: Rosemary Pryor, Communications Officer, International Grammar School Mob: 0420 575 609