

learning links



Helping Kids Learn

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Information Sheet 1

Factors influencing emotional health in children and teenagers

By Norman Goodsell, Family Counsellor

Early childhood experiences and family input are important in building emotional resilience in children. As children become older, their need for consistency and continuing family attachment continues to be critical for their emotional development and behaviour.

It is widely accepted that childhood and early adolescent experiences play a vital role in later adult behaviour including how we cope with pressure and disappointment.

As adults, our perceptions of the world owe much to our childhood and we often play out the roles we have learned as children and young people. If we are insecure in our personal lives and fearful of the future, our world will be viewed as a place full of ambiguities or uncertainties and threats.

Put another way, negative "scripts" or responses learned early in life are usually difficult (although not impossible) to change as we get older.

A parent or guardian who actively promotes positive and helpful life scripts for a child, invests in their child's emotional future by teaching personal strategies to be called upon when faced with negative and potentially destabilising emotions.

There are two key practical ingredients. The first is the development of personal strategies aimed at strengthening emotions – examples of these include awareness of body cues and learning physiological relaxation techniques.

The second is the modelling of constructive thinking or the ability to check fears, anxieties and irrational feelings with calm convincing self-argument – the development of rational, positive thinking. This underlying approach has become the basis of much current counselling and psychotherapy and is central to techniques that use a solution focus to promote emotional health – the goal being to build resilience not fragility.

Factors impacting emotional health

Early childhood experiences are crucial to emotional health.

The importance of primary attachment and bonding to a parent or carer in the first twelve months of a child's life is well researched and documented – it establishes initial trust and security as well as building a foundation for future emotional development.

Ongoing family experiences generally remain the most influential factors impacting on younger children.

Family events such as sickness, unemployment, loss and family breakdown can have devastating effects, especially if the child perceives a threat to the maintenance of the family unit itself.

Schooling also plays an important role.

Experiences such as "connectedness" with the school and teacher, feeling nurtured and supported by the school environment, being able to join with peers and keeping up with classwork all contribute to self esteem, which in turn reduces ambiguity or uncertainty.

Learning Links is a non-profit charity assisting children who have difficulty learning and their families.

We raise funds to help children from birth to 18 years by offering a range of services including the following.

Early Childhood Services for children from birth to six years.

- Early childhood intervention and support for very young children.
- An inclusive preschool for children with and without special needs.
- An assessment and consultancy service for families who are concerned about their young child's development.
- Specialist early childhood teaching and therapy.

School Age Services for children from Kindergarten to Year 12 who have low support needs.

- Comprehensive assessments.
- Small group tuition and therapy.
- Occupational and speech therapy programs combining specialist education services and therapy.
- Outreach programs.
- The Ronald McDonald Learning Program for seriously ill children and the Reading for Life Program for children falling behind in their reading.

Family Services helping and supporting families and health professionals.

- Centre and home-based family counselling.
- Parenting Programs and groups for families.
- Case Management Services.

Professional Development for teachers and health professionals.

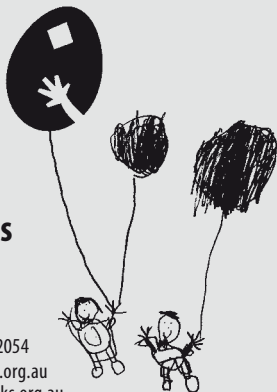
Presentations, workshops and advice on identifying and helping children with learning difficulties, learning disabilities and developmental delays.

Learning Links has branches in six Sydney locations at Peakhurst, Penshurst, Fairfield, Miller, Dee Why and Randwick. We also offer some services to children in country NSW, the ACT, Victoria and New Zealand. A complete list of branch locations and contact numbers is on the back cover.

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Problems in one area may and often do affect security in another, although occasionally a non-assertive child may camouflage their emotional stress particularly if he or she is a compliant student. Usually the child does show some behavioural signals that suggest an emotional problem.

Apart from family and school, there are a number of other factors that contribute to the emotional development of young children. These include biological make up, outside social and sporting interactions and modern communications such as computers and television.

As children grow older, these influences continue to be significant especially those most closely associated with self image and the need for greater individualisation such as teenage fashion and pop culture. This situation is compounded by the increasing pressure on young people as a marketable commodity in our consumer driven society.

A young person who has developed emotional resilience during childhood is in an advantageous position to work through the challenges of later years.

Signs of emotional fragility

Young children generally regress in their behaviours when confronted with stressful situations. Behaviours may include withdrawal, becoming sulky, being clingy with a parent, frequent nightmares, bed-wetting, aggressive play at school and/or with siblings or a particular fear or phobia.

Parents and teachers usually recognise that something is wrong.

Changes in behaviour and interests are perfectly normal as children move through their various stages of development and parents need to consider this when looking at any recent specific behaviour.

Older children and young teenagers may display more subtle changes at school and with peers. These might include deteriorating academic motivation and grades, a noticeable shift of interest in friends and social activities or worrying changes in eating and/or sleeping patterns.

What can parents/guardians do?

One of the most crucial ingredients for healthy, well-adjusted families is positive communication, which instils in the child the value of mutual family support.

This communication will include things like praise when a child does something good or encouragement and reassurance instead of negative comment if a child does not achieve as expected.

Although it's often hard to deal with misbehaviour in children, parents should always try to avoid criticism that fails to encourage desired behaviour.

Consistency at home is imperative to emotional development as it helps to reduce personal ambiguity or uncertainty. For example, the young child needs to learn what boundaries and rules apply within the family in order to internalise these into their own psyche. The older child appreciates the security that comes with established routine.

A fact of life for many modern families is separation and divorce – it is essential that separated parents continue to communicate about their children so as to minimise the effects of different parenting practices. The concept of shared parental responsibility has now been enshrined in family law legislation.

By taking an active interest in the child's schoolwork and social activities, parents reinforce mutuality and assist with adjustment to new situations.

These days, with countless outside pressures on parents and the instant availability of 'baby sitters' such as television and electronic games, it is perhaps more possible to be a "passive" parent than ever before. Unfortunately, Nintendo is unlikely to simulate the challenges children face in everyday relationships.

It may come as a surprise to some people to learn that, despite protestations to the contrary, teenagers really do want their parents to maintain a watchful eye over them.

Some adolescents appear to withdraw from the family and become less informative about their friends and activities. This may cause parents to become concerned and sometimes angry.

Teenagers usually don't set out to keep secrets from their parents on purpose. Their behaviour is a consequence of their need to establish a "new" identity – one that separates them from childhood and all that goes with it such as dependence on parents. Despite this, as every parent knows, teenagers remain very much dependent.

The role of the parent often has to change gear to accommodate this stage of development, yet it is essential that strong parental interest be maintained. Many teenagers I see in private practice criticise their parents' apparent lack of interest in them, yet the parents invariably tell me that their kids don't want them around.

Often the disagreements seem to start with competing attitudes and interests. Teenagers can be aggressive, irresponsible and self opinionated – behaviours used to test the boundaries at home.

Parents should resist falling into the trap of responding in kind to this type of behaviour. It is better to remain calm and consistent, staying available to listen without necessarily feeling obliged to agree.

Parents are more likely to connect to their children if they talk objectively about their own attitudes and feelings as teenagers, instead of bemoaning how much the world has changed. (The generation gap has been there for a long time and it is helpful to remember that nothing stops still – when today's teenagers are tomorrow's parents, attitudes and interests will have again changed.)

During teenage years, dealing with erratic emotions becomes more important than ever before.

Younger children are more likely to disclose or demonstrate emotional issues than are teenagers, who often try to control the emotion by 'keeping it in'. This can present a dilemma for a parent who is caught between respecting the young person's growing need for privacy and wanting to remain a confidant, especially if there are undeclared problems.

Most young people respond to expressions of affection and interest from their parents, albeit often in places and at times of their choosing. Conversation may be stifled at home yet quite open and flowing in the car on the way to activities and sporting events. This can be because eye contact is limited and music may be playing, creating a psychological comfort zone (at least for the teenager).

Occasionally, the parent may find it impossible to 'get through' and the child's behaviour causes great concern to the family. When this happens, action outside the immediate family may be helpful and involve another caring relative, adult friend or professional assistance.

It should always be remembered that parenting teenagers requires common sense, an open mind, flexibility, patience, support, and a deal of self-assurance on the part of the parent.

These personal attributes are more likely to be developed in our sons/daughters if they recognise them in us.

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– all enquiries to Head Office

School Age Services
– contact your local branch

Family Services
– contact your local branch

All other enquiries
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