



Building Emotional Intelligence

A quick-reference guide for parents & caregivers

What is emotional intelligence (EI)? Emotional intelligence is the ability to recognize, understand, and manage our own emotions, and to recognize and respond skillfully to the emotions of others. It is not about being calm all the time or suppressing big feelings — it's about helping children name what they feel, understand why, and choose healthy ways to respond. Like any skill, EI is learned through practice and relationships, and children build it best with a patient, emotionally available adult alongside them.

The 5 skills of EI — “RULER”

- R** Recognizing emotions in yourself and others (face, body, tone).
- U** Understanding the causes and effects of feelings.
- L** Labeling emotions with a precise vocabulary.
- E** Expressing emotions appropriately for the moment.
- R** Regulating emotions with healthy strategies.

Signs your child may need support

- Frequent, intense meltdowns that are hard to recover from
- Difficulty naming feelings beyond “good,” “bad,” or “fine”
- Trouble calming down or shifting out of a strong emotion
- Avoids, withdraws, or lashes out when upset
- Struggles to read or respond to others' feelings

What parents can do

- **Name it to tame it.** Put words to feelings out loud: “You seem frustrated.” Naming an emotion calms the brain's alarm system.
- **Validate before you fix.** Connect first (“That was really disappointing”), then problem-solve together.
- **Coach, don't dismiss.** Treat big feelings as moments to teach, not misbehavior to shut down.
- **Model it yourself.** Narrate your own emotions and coping: “I'm stressed, so I'm taking three deep breaths.”
- **Build a feelings vocabulary.** Use a feelings chart; go beyond mad/sad/happy.
- **Teach calming tools in calm moments.** Belly breathing, a cozy corner, movement, counting.
- **Set limits with empathy.** “It's okay to be angry. It's not okay to hit. Let's find another way.”

Helpful phrases to keep in your back pocket

- “I can see this is really hard for you right now.”
- “All feelings are okay. Let’s figure out what to do with this one.”
- “Do you want help, a hug, or a little space?”
- “Let’s take a breath together first, then we’ll talk.”

Recommended resources

Books for parents: Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child (John Gottman) · Permission to Feel (Marc Brackett) · The Whole-Brain Child (Siegel & Bryson) · How to Talk So Kids Will Listen (Faber & Mazlish)

Websites: Greater Good Science Center — greatergood.berkeley.edu · CASEL — casel.org · Marc Brackett / RULER — marcbrackett.com · The Gottman Institute — gottman.com

When to reach out for extra help

- If emotional struggles are intense, last for weeks, or interfere with friendships, school, sleep, or family life, a child therapist can help your whole family build these skills. You don’t have to navigate it alone.

Educational handout — not a substitute for individualized clinical advice.