

# insights

## What it means to be an emotionally intelligent parent

by Michael Grose



Ten year-old Elle liked to be active, but one weekend things got out of control. A jazz ballet concert, a game of netball, and a family visit to her cousin's house meant no time to herself. And she let her parents know it with constant moaning, as well as a tantrum or two.

Her father held his tongue for most of the weekend, but couldn't help but give her some fatherly advice on Sunday night. "You've spent the whole weekend moaning about how busy you are. Maybe you need to drop one of your activities, if they are stressing you out so much!"

A tantrum followed...from Elle.

Elle's mum took a different tack. She had a hunch that something was bothering her daughter. "You sound like something is bothering you big-time. What's up?"

"I've got to give a talk at school on Monday in front of the whole school and I haven't time to prepare. It'll be awful and everyone will laugh."

Her mum replied, "You sound like you might be pretty nervous. That makes sense. Giving a talk in front others can be nerve-wracking."

Elle dropped her shoulders, smiled and said, "You bet!" She was relieved because her mum understood how she felt. In fact, her mum had unlocked the problem for her and reflected back how she felt.

Elle's dad focused on her behaviour and responded in kind (with well-meaning advice about her future behaviour), while her mother focused on the feelings that acted as a possible driver to her daughter's behaviour. She took an emotionally smart approach, which turned out to be the right one in this circumstance.

Emotionally intelligent parents don't dismiss children's behaviour and allow kids to do as they please. There are times that we need to focus on a child's behaviour. A child who is rude in public should be reminded in no uncertain terms that poor manners are inappropriate. However, there are times when smart parents need to look beyond the obvious behaviours to get a good understanding of what's happening to their child, and to help a child better understand and manage their emotions.

So what does an emotionally intelligent parent look like? And importantly what is the impact on kids, parents and families of this approach?

**Emotionally intelligent parents have the following five attributes in common. They will usually:**

## **1. Listen more and judge less**

There is nothing better than being understood. Parents who operate from an emotionally-smart mindset are more likely to listen to their kids when emotions are high, trying to access what may be going on, rather than clamping down their behaviour or closing them down with well-meaning advice.

Impact: Better, more open relationships.

## **2. Accept strong emotions**

Anyone who lives with teenagers will know that emotions can run very high. They can say the worst possible things to each other and, at times, to you. Ten minutes after delivering a hateful tirade they can be cuddling up to the person who was the butt of their anger, frustration or anxiety. Emotionally intelligent parents know that feelings need to be expressed rather than bottled up, and allowed to fester. They also believe there is nothing so bad that a child can't give voice to in a family, however there are behaviours that are not unacceptable.

Impact: A healthy expression of emotions.

## **3. Focus on the present**

Most parents are rightfully future-focused. We focus on the homework that needs to be handed in tomorrow; the washing that needs to be done; the meal that needs to be cooked. That's part of everyday life. Children generally focus on the here and now. That of course can be frustrating to a task-oriented future-focused mother or father. However when we lower our gaze we are more likely to pick up how kids are feeling, and importantly help them understand and manage their moods and emotions.

Impact: Happier families and less stress felt at home.

## **4. Use rules rather than their moods to determine discipline**

Some parents discipline according to their moods. If they feel good then they give children plenty of lenience. If they are feel bad then they pick their kids up on every little thing. It's better to stick to the family and house rules; that makes you more predictable, which kids really crave.

Impact: More consistent parenting

## **5. Develop a language around feelings**

A family develops a vocabulary around the things that are important to them. Kids in a sport mad family will inevitably have a rich vocabulary around their chosen sport. The same holds for emotional intelligence. Families that truly value building emotional smarts will develop in kids a rich palette of words that will help them describe how they feel. This vocabulary will inevitably stay with them for life.

Impact: Better relationships later in life at work and in their own families.



### **Michael Grose**

Michael Grose, founder of Parenting Ideas, is one of Australia's leading parenting educators. He's the author of 12 books for parents including *Spoonfed Generation* and the best-selling *Why First Borns Rule the World and Last Borns Want to Change It*. His latest release *Anxious Kids*, was co-authored with Dr Jodi Richardson.