

Resource Article

Emotional Intelligence

Carey Sturgeon

Emotional Intelligence (EI) involves understanding and taking control of your feelings and actions toward yourself and others. A person with EI is better prepared to reach her goals and have healthy relationships.

Having EI Skills Means You:

- Know and manage your feelings.
- Motivate yourself.
- Set goals and stay focused on them, solving problems as you go.
- Persevere and do not give up when faced with difficulties.
- Delay gratification. You can work toward a long-term goal and resist the temptation to give in for immediate, short-term pleasure. For example, a student who can delay gratification may travel long distances, study hard, and deal with ridicule from others for several years in order to earn a degree and have a better life in the future. A student who cannot delay gratification may quit school or neglect his studies and use drugs and alcohol just to feel good for the moment.
- Recognize the feelings of others as you build relationships with them. You are able to show empathy toward others. You can relate to what others are feeling and find ways to support them. You are able to put yourself in the other person's place. You are able to cooperate with others to work toward a common goal. This involves teamwork. As you successfully work with others, you are able to resolve conflict.
- Communicate and listen effectively. You let people know that you understand their feelings. You use "I" statements when you are expressing your feelings rather than blaming and attacking another person's character. For example, you might say, "I felt angry when you rolled your eyes and walked away when I was talking to you." You would not say, "You made me angry. You are such a rude, selfish person!" You make requests assertively. For example, you might say, "Please look at me and listen respectfully as I share my opinion with you."

Why Is EI Important?

EI affects brain development and helps teens to learn better. When teens learn EI skills, they are better able to pay attention and remember information. Several studies have found that teens who learned EI skills had improved academic performance and attendance and fewer disciplinary issues at school.

EI may help teens to become more responsible and caring citizens. Several international organizations have recognized the value of EI and have incorporated EI skills into their anti-drug, anti-violence, and anti-bullying programs.

EI leads to successful work life. Research shows that EI skills are up to 4 times more important than intellect or academic knowledge for being successful at work. EI leads to successful leadership, no matter what position you hold. The most successful leaders in the world are those who have developed high levels of EI skills.

Tips for Teaching EI Skills to Teens

- Create a safe environment for teens to express their feelings.
- Build an attitude of friendliness toward emotion. This means you accept and work with whatever feelings teens have.
- Name emotions to help teens put words to their own and others' feelings.
- Teach teens how to cope with their emotions by using a positive, problem-solving approach.
- Help teens develop empathy. Ask them to think about how other people feel—for example, "How would you feel if someone yelled at you like you just yelled at your friend?"
- Have conversations about the positive and negative behaviours you observe. This will help teens increase their interpersonal awareness.
- Provide teens with specific, supportive feedback about their positive and negative interactions with others—for instance, "While you were playing, you noticed another girl sitting alone and looking sad. You went to sit and talk with her. You did a great job of showing caring behaviour." If an interaction does not go well, you may want to ask teens to problem-solve with you. What could they have done differently?
- Ask questions to encourage self-reflection—for example, "How did it feel to stop playing and talk to the sad girl?" This helps teens to actively choose to be caring people.
- Become an "emotions coach." Empathize with teens and consider their outbursts or mistakes as opportunities to connect with them and supportively teach them EI skills. You do not want to simply discipline them.

EI skills need to be learned. People are not born with them. Learning EI skills begins with a child's earliest relationship with her primary caregiver. Teens who have not had healthy bonding experiences with adults early in life or who have experienced trauma may need additional support to develop EI skills. They will need to have their own emotional needs met through a caring relationship with an "emotions coach" like you. You must help them cope with difficult emotions before they can develop empathy for others.

Be a positive role model. Examine your personal attitudes about expressing your own emotions. Talk with friends about your potential blind spots. At any age, you can learn or enhance your EI skills. Teens learn how to interact with people by watching you and other adults. They learn more from your actions than your words.