



Sensitive or Insecure? Raise Emotionally Resilient Children

“My child is very sensitive,” said Melba. “I make every effort to protect him from insults, from being excluded, and from other uncaring behaviors. I worry, though: It seems he is becoming even more sensitive and less able to make friends. How can I help him to handle life without falling apart emotionally?”

Our culture values emotional protection over emotional resilience. This so-called “sensitivity” is a learned response—the result of well-intended parenting and social concepts of overprotecting the child from human experiences.

For this conversation, I would like to introduce a different view of sensitivity. In my experience, a sensitive human being is one who is aware of the emotions of other humans, animals, and all living beings. It is a person who is likely to have empathy, treats animals gently, and prefers gentle music and artistic expressions.

It takes confidence to be able to be truly sensitive because it requires that one is not worried about themselves and therefore able to be aware of others’ feelings and experiences even when the expression is harsh.

Young children are self-centered, but not concerned about self-image until we train them to be. Feeling insulted isn’t sensitivity; rather, it is perhaps a manifestation of insecurity arising from dependency on approval. Rather than worry about any blows to the child’s self-image, our goal is to nurture his tender and compassionate nature, as well as grow this muscle ourselves. To nurture such an authentic compassion means to empower emotional resilience that is not shattered by personal offense. While powerful people are not easily offended, they are often tender and empathetic.

For example, the well-known psychologist Dr. Jordan Peterson is a powerful man who is sensitive. He easily sheds tears when speaking about human suffering, yet is not at all moved by criticism directed toward himself.

Therefore, while the child is naturally self-centered, our goal is to allow the child to gradually discover her awareness of the world around her, free of the focus on self-image, so she can connect and notice another person’s distress, a flower needing water, or a pet who is hungry. Over the years, an aware child can more easily use her natural sense of oneness with the world to tune into others, precisely because of her emotional strength. She is not as occupied with anxiety about self-image, and is therefore free to notice and be sensitive to the nuances of others’ feelings and needs.

Chiropractic Newsletter | Well-Being

How We Unknowingly Teach Insecurity

Being dependent on approval is painful. Most toddlers are not offended; they want life to go their way, but have no interest in protecting a self-image. Over time we unintentionally teach such reactions through praise, expectations of perfection, correcting of mistakes, helping for the sake of perfect outcomes, and intervening when things go wrong or when anyone criticizes or rejects the child.

Putting too much stress on emotions isn't helpful either. Emotions can be validated without adding or dramatizing. Free emotional self-expression gives relief and connection to the child, which is healing (see chapter one in my book, *Raising Our Children, Raising Ourselves*), but dwelling on it or dramatizing is not. We must also empower children to move on and accept reality; otherwise, life is much too overwhelming at any age. We cannot fix reality, but we can learn to respond peacefully.

When we rescue the child or rush to fix or help in challenging situations, she learns to fear challenge and emotions. She becomes dependent on things going her way and on looking good at all times, craving approval and feeling anxious when not getting it.

For example, when Nina (a seven-year-old at my family intensive retreat) came to me saying, "They won't play with me," I responded with validation first, "You wanted to keep playing" and listened to her fully. When she was done, I asked, "What would you like to do instead?" Her face lifted to a smile and she asked for paper and crayons.

Nurture True Sensitivity

Here are a few ways to build emotional resilience and aware connections in your child and in yourself.

1. Freedom from needing approval

Allow failure to occur without suggesting that something has to be fixed or done better and without fixing anything. (Striving for excellence comes from within when there is no manipulation.) Your love is true love when it is unconditional and allows for your child's autonomy. In another family intensive, an older sibling called his sister 'stupid' which, the parents said, usually would start a huge fight. I chimed in with, "I am stupid too," and gave an example of a clumsy mistake. The kids laughed and then started telling each of their own stupid moments while cracking up. They had many examples and sharing these allowed them to release tension and to realize the freedom in saying 'yes' to criticism and in accepting their own imperfections. Weeks later the mother told me that the boy stopped annoying his sister because he said it didn't work; she wasn't hurt. One of the greatest indicators of a healthy family isn't flawless behavior, but rather an abundance of laughter regarding one's own flaws.

2. Reduce evaluations

It is best to minimize fuss over the child's activities and behavior. They will stay more authentic without praise or rewards for 'success' or disappointments for 'failure.' Even, "You will do better next time" suggests a pressure to succeed. Success and failure are concepts that are not helpful to children and hinder their free exploration and development.

When praised and rewarded, children become dependent on external approval, making them less likely to act freely and authentically and more easily upset by disapproval or rejection. When praised, the reaction of 'joy' is really a relief for getting the approval the child has become dependent on. For more on this important subject, read *Punished by Rewards* by researcher Alfie Kohn and visit my website to read my three-part article "The Price of Praise."

Chiropractic Newsletter | Well-Being

True encouragement springs from unconditional love and an appreciation of the person, rather than evaluation of their achievements. If a child is not taught to be flawless, they can handle criticism without falling apart.

Model being resilient; when criticized, consider saying, “Yes, what I just did was foolish,” and have a laugh. The automatic thought—No, I am not—is defense which is divisive and unhelpful. Instead, when not protecting the ego, a response can be a grateful, “Oh, yes, I am.” (Even if only very partially true in that situation.) When we don’t take ourselves so seriously, even an untrue judgment falls on a grateful heart that is humble and able to find value in what is spoken. Even better, when less focused on self-image, one can notice the pain that drives anyone’s harsh words or actions.

People often ask if this endorses bullying. On the contrary, a vulnerable connection with no defense often heals the bully by bringing out their own vulnerability and stops the bullying (as in the big brother in the story above). **Connection is not created when we defend, but when we listen until we truly understand the other person or child’s point of view and emotional capacity.**

3. No blame but gratitude

Blaming is taking the painful position of a victim, creating disconnection and strife. If you were raised to seek approval—whether through praise, fear of punishment, shame, or the withdrawal of love—accepting judgment with gratitude can be a significant challenge, yet a worthy one to conquer for yourself and for your loved ones. The best gift you can give your children is to raise yourself.

Remind yourself that one must be in great distress to mistreat another. Tuning into your child or partner’s pain when they are harsh is true sensitivity, and by far more rewarding and connecting than feeling victimized and blaming them. You can do that even if it is clear that you must move away from them.

Choosing not to blame is an act of kindness towards yourself and the other person. The fight to prove oneself right by blaming others is the root of immense suffering. By modeling a mind that is grateful to be found wrong and curious to learn, you model to your child true emotional freedom.

4. “Tell me more”

Among my clients, “Tell me more” is known as “Naomi’s magic words.” A child wants to be heard. When you think a child misbehaved, she actually has acted the best she could to meet a valid need. As long as the child feels safe to share her inner experience, “Tell me more” opens the door to connection and clarity. To make it safe, listen without morals or suggestions. Validate what you hear and confirm your understanding of the child’s real need and intent. No sermons; open questions create safe self-expression and trust. In such a peaceful state, the solution often comes out of the child, or she is able to seek your productive input.

Stay in tune with the child, spouse, or friend—especially when they lash out. Instead of focusing on yourself and blocking them with comments like “Don’t say that again,” become curious about what drives their explosive expression.

When a child says, “I hate you,” or “You’re mean,” she must be in distress. A compassionate response is: “Wow, that’s a painful thought. Tell me more . . . what did I do/say that felt mean?” Then listen and ask follow-up open questions.

5. Practice tuning into the experiences of others

To help your child retain and grow her natural compassion, you can invite her to play guessing games about the needs and feelings of others. However, there is no need to coax your child's engagement. You simply invite; the child either engages or not. Here are some ideas:

- "Let's see if we can guess how Daddy feels when he gets home." (e.g., Tired? Needing a break? Excited? Wanting a hug? Hungry?)
- Grandma is nodding off in a rocking chair: "Do you think she is ready for dinner, or do you think she would rather sleep?"
- To an older sibling, "What do you think your brother would enjoy for his birthday?"
- To an older child: "How would you like to sit here at the park and guess the mood of people passing by?"
- "Gee, that girl is yelling at this boy. I wonder what she is upset about?" (Not, "I wonder what he did," which is blame.)
- To mature children, "Mommy seems irritated. Do you think she needs to talk about it, or does she need time for herself?"
- To a child returning from group activities, some possible questions: "What did you enjoy best? What didn't work out? Did someone do something you liked? Did someone need your help?"

We need not push a child out of being self-centered, which he must be for a good purpose. Occupation with oneself is not the same as anxiety about self-image. Nurturing the child's natural compassion while not focusing on self-image is the path to emotional resilience that clears the way for engagement with all of life and society.

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