

may-june @ symbio

upcoming presentations & webinars

Emotionally Intelligent Discipline

Thursday 10 May
7:30-9:00pm

@ Recess Urban Recreation
470 Carolina Street
San Francisco CA

In order for discipline to be truly effective, it has to help a child learn how to regulate and appropriately express emotions as well as control behavior. Because of the goal of discipline is for a child to internalize a sense of appropriate vs. inappropriate behavior and ultimately moral action, discipline has to be relationally relevant. We will discuss effective ways to set limits, deliver emotionally supportive guidance and foster the development of a healthy sense of self in your child in the toddler and preschool years.

Recess members:
\$35/person or \$55/couple
non-members:
\$40/person or \$60/couple

RSVP: [click here](#)

Webinar: Sleep Issues: The Toddler and Preschooler Years - Noelle Cochran, PsyD

Thursday 24 May
12:00pm - 1:00 pm PT

[click here for information and registration](#)

Webinar: Infant Sleep Issues - Noelle Cochran, PsyD

Thursday 28 June
8:00-9:00pm PT

[click here for information and registration](#)



Discipline and Your Child's Self-Esteem

Q: *We have an adorable three year-old boy. He's sensitive, sweet and incredibly headstrong. My wife and I have always tried to discipline by redirecting him, explaining our instructions and using lots of praise. The problem is, that this approach only works sometimes. To get him to listen, most of the time I have to use a harsh tone or impose a consequence. When we do this, he listens, but then he gets so upset when he doesn't get his way that I'm worried I'm causing him to feel bad about himself. I struggled with low self-esteem as a child and really want to protect my son from the struggles I went through; I'm just not sure how to do that without letting him get his way all the time. Yesterday, he cried when we had to leave his soccer class after he pushed another little boy and he told me on the way home, between sobs, "You don't love me." I was stunned. I don't think I've ever said or done anything that would lead him to believe that I don't love him so I'm not sure where they came from but now I'm worried. Can you help me understand what I can do to make sure he feels good about himself? And what to do when he's upset about not getting his way?*

A: A significant part of the work we do in our practice as family psychologists, can be summed up as helping parents answer two kinds of questions: How do I help my child grow into a confident, emotionally-healthy person? and How do I get my child to behave in a particular way (follow directions, stop hitting, pop in the potty, sleep through the night, etc.)? You could say that these questions represent, respectively, the transcendent and mundane aspects of the work of parenting. Unfortunately, popular opinion has increasingly come to see these aspects as poles that exist in opposition to one another.

The fact that much current parenting literature tends to focus on either self-esteem and emotional development or on behavior management only adds to the perception that there is a gap, or even a conflict, between parenting practices in service of each goal. However, nothing could be further from the truth. In order for any approach to discipline to be successful, children must have (and parents must help them develop) an understanding of broad range of emotions they will experience as they develop impulses, learn to manage them, experiment with defiance, and encounter positive and negative responses from parents. They must also develop the skills needed to appropriately express, direct and modulate those emotions. Together, emotional understanding and management skills form the basis of emotional intelligence.

Without emotional intelligence children will not be successful in complying with parents' directives (when those directives are not in synch with a child's own wants) because they will not be able to manage the emotional experience of frustration, disappointment, impatience or anxiety involved. They will also have a hard time regulating themselves because they will not have an understanding of how to create positive emotional experiences or modulate negative ones, and so, they will remain dependant on parents to perform these functions for them. This leads to an ever-increasing intensity of need to control parents, which, of course, leads to some difficult times for both kids and parents.

There are many wonderful books available for parents interested in the process of building emotional intelligence in children. Most of them stress the need for using empathy when speaking to children, being careful never to equate negative consequences with a negative message about a child's character, and discussing emotions with children on a regular basis. In order to learn to tolerate negative emotions, children have to feel that their internal resources are bigger than whatever discomfort or strife they may be experiencing in the moment: they need to

feel emotionally secure. As such, self-esteem building experiences, expressions of affection and reflections of a child's positive attributes are all part of developing emotional intelligence.

Some of the confusion regarding the relationship between behavior management and emotional development lies in the common misperception that setting limits, imposing consequences or reprimanding children damage the development of self-esteem.

In truth, fostering self-confidence and setting limits are absolutely not mutually exclusive; rather, they are inseparably linked. Your child's sense of self and security will both be increased by your differential responses to the behaviors that you want to encourage and those you want to discourage. In addition to acting as guardrails between the zone of positive (or tolerable) family life and the chaotic hinterlands beyond, boundaries are the markers that remind children that parents are still in control. Despite the fact that this reality will often frustrate a child when he encounters it, in the bigger picture it will also allow him to feel safe. Every child needs to know that, as powerful as she is, her parents are more powerful. That is how she knows they can keep her safe; it reassures her that she is not responsible for things she is too young to manage.

When children know they are pushing parents around, they may feel giddy with power, but they will also have to contend with the anxiety-provoking sense that they may be powerful enough to break the system. They know that they are not really supposed to be in charge; and the feeling that the family structure has broken down can feel to a child like there is something wrong with him. This is why boundaries are just as important to the development self-confidence as ample expressions of love, admiration, interest and respect. One of the most potent opportunities for the expression of unconditional love lies in those moments when parents make it clear to a child that they are displeased by his behavior but still full of love for him.

That's a concept that is very hard to convey to children in words – they need living experiences of it in order to come to understand it. Children will often challenge the apparent contradiction by lamenting to parents when boundaries are enforced: “You don't like me (or “I don't like you”) because you made me leave the park.” Sadly, many parents buy into this logic instead of contradicting it. They relent on a boundary in order to reassure a child that she is loved. In doing so, they confirm the child's misperception that gratification and love are the same thing.

When your child is making declarations like the one above think of it as child-speak for “If you love me, I should

always get my way with you.” Your response in this meta-communication needs to convey both authority and affection: “No, that is not how life and love work. I am not afraid of you being upset because I know that we still love each other even when we are upset. When you learn that, you won’t have to be so afraid of being upset either.” This message reinforces the

reciprocity between clear limit setting and a child’s sense of security. Maintaining structure and providing positive feedback to your child are two sides of a scale, emotional intelligence and a secure sense of self are found in the balance. When you uphold a value on both, children will learn to do the same internally as they grow.

symbio

www.symbiosf.com

noelle cochran, psyd
lele diamond, mft license no. 40324