

Increasing emotional intelligence takes practice

My son is smart, but his grades are falling because he doesn't do his homework. He's in the sixth grade. Is this a phase? What can we do?

It might be a phase, but it's one that deserves attention. Instead of focusing solely on academics, though, you might want to work on something family life researchers call "emotional intelligence." Since you know your son is smart, it's probably not that he can't do the work. But he may be responding inappropriately to other factors.

Psychologist Daniel Goleman introduced the concept of emotional intelligence in 1995 with "Emotional Intelligence: Why it Can Matter More than IQ." In the best-seller, he explained that emotional intelligence is the ability to handle issues, emotions and relationships positively, rationally and with empathy. Doing so doesn't just come naturally, at least not for most people. By learning and practicing the skills involved, you can use them in dealing with your son, and he'll have the benefit of learning them at an early age.

The skills outlined by Goleman include:

- **Self awareness**, or being aware of your feelings and moods. This helps you understand why you're feeling what you're feeling.
- **Managing emotions**, or having self-control even when you're angry, sad or fearful. You can display your emotions in ways that are appropriate for different social situations.
- **Motivation**, or using your emotions to help you achieve your goals, while at the same time controlling impulses and delaying gratification in order to achieve those goals.



- **Empathy**, or the ability to understand how someone else is feeling.
- **Social skills**, or being able to carry on conversations and deal with others' emotions.

Since the concept was first popularized, many books have been written on emotional intelligence. One highly respected psychologist and author, John Gottman, spent decades examining how parents interact with their children. His book, "Raising An Emotionally Intelligent Child," is full of strategies to help parents with what he calls "Emotion Coaching" their children. Coaching is a good term for this kind of thing — a good coach instills discipline, motivates, and helps kids learn to work as a team. As parents, you can coach your child to act in appropriate ways to be successful. You can get an overview of Gottman's approach at the Talaris Research Institute's Web site at http://www.talaris.org/spotlight_emocoaching_steps.htm.

One of the problems children face is that they often can't articulate what they're feeling. You can help by using terms to describe emotions: "You seem frustrated today," for example, or "You look like you're angry about something." Talking about feelings can help your child manage them, and that could help you both figure out why he's not doing his homework this year.

Family Fundamentals is a monthly column on family issues. It is a service of Ohio State University Extension and the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center. Send questions to Family Fundamentals, c/o Martha Filipic, 2021 Coffey Road, Columbus, OH 43210-1044, or filipic.3@cfaes.osu.edu.



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