

POSITIVE PARENTING: BUILDING YOUR CHILD'S EMOTIONAL BANK ACCOUNT

By Anne Felt, M.S.

Effectively handling one's emotional life is important at any age. The process of emotional learning is an integral part of a child's development. Adult emotional stability and maturity is rooted in the child's successful emotional growth. Bonding between parent and child forms the basis of early emotional growth and continues throughout a person's life. Research is now showing that emotional intelligence is even more important than intellectual scores as an indicator of successful living. Emotional IQ involves a person's sense of self, knowledge and handling of emotions, compassion and the ability to relate empathically and reciprocally with others. A person's ability to manage stress, communicate feelings, resolve conflicts and maintain meaningful relationships is affected by emotional intelligence. These life skills are crucial to effective adult functioning in work, families and other relationships.

The analogy of a bank account may be a helpful way to visualize emotional development. At birth the child's "account" is blank, much like a newly opened savings account. There are no predetermined "deposits" because the baby has no experience to base reactions on. The baby's needs are straightforward: feed me, keep me warm and clean, and allow me to sleep. However even at this stage parents are not always able to perceive his needs immediately. The way in which a baby's needs are met determines his level of thriving. As his needs are met the baby thrives. Now fast-forward to the age of 18 months to 2 years where the typical exchange between parent and child includes a preponderance of the word "NO". As the child gains an ever-increasing sense of autonomy there are many "No No's". The child himself uses nay saying to assert his own budding power. This is the typical developmental sequence. By the age of 3 the child may be more reasonable and the power struggles may diminish to some extent. Depending on the child's temperament however, the power struggles may be intensifying with age. There is no true rule of thumb, and children certainly do not come with an instruction manual. The parental role of guide, coach, consultant, referee, mentor and rule keeper is in process.

A child's sense of self-esteem is based on feeling lovable and capable. With all the rules, how lovable and capable does he feel by the end of an average day? How much positive feedback does he receive compared to corrections and rules? In building a substantially positive emotional bank account there must be regular deposits. Look at a typical exchange at breakfast. "Time to eat now", "Don't spill your milk", "Sit still and eat", "Please eat with your spoon", "Hurry up we'll be late for school", "Stop playing with your food." This commentary may feel necessary to keep the breakfast moving towards a timely conclusion, but there is not much positive feedback here. How much of the daily routines are characterized by these exchanges?

Throughout the day it is relatively easy to build the positive balance in your child's account by making positive, brief statements and by providing physical affection and reassurance. "I like your happy smile today." "I like it when you are ready on time." "You're good at putting your socks on." "I feel happy when you eat so well." "Nice

job.” “Way to go.” “Wow! Nice work.” Positive physical feedback includes hugs, a pat or rubs on the back, holding hands, loving or interested eye contact, high fives, and a quick tickle or snuggle.

When a child’s emotional bank account is full, he/she is more likely to cooperate and to develop responsible behaviors. The old analogy of the cup being half empty or half full applies even at a young age. Helping your child to feel more “full” or satisfied goes a long way towards creating an emotionally healthy relationship. When corrections are necessary, the child has the reserves and resources to draw upon and continues to know he is loved. The bank account is still full even when debits are necessary. At times when the debits are heavy, be sure to rebalance the account with a healthy dose of loving deposits for your child. Find ways for him/her to feel lovable and capable.

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