

Raising Resilient & Emotionally Honest Teens

Ronald Brill, founder of the Coping Skills for Kids & Brain Works Project, © 2013

In my book, *Emotional Honesty & Self-Acceptance*, I offer parents some strategies for helping youth to safely survive their challenging teenage years. Parenting doesn't require us to be perfect. But by the time our kids become teenagers, we may have ignored at our peril teaching coping strategies at home. Our once "child" is now obsessed with "individuating" from parents. It's nothing personal -- just a natural, instinctive drive that is part of adolescent development.

Since none of us are completely capable of getting over challenging circumstances that leave us stressed, irritated, angry or sad, parents can use their own coping frustrations to share mutual concerns with their children. This is much easier done before teenage years, when parental influence still holds sway over children. Afterward, teens become fixated on emulating peers and entertainment media.

Why Emotional Resilience is Linked to Emotional Honesty

Emotional Resilience, the 1996 book by the late psychiatrist David Viscott, shaped my own realization of emotional honesty as a fundamental key to one's emotional health. Reading his observations led to my own book that first described principles of a new field of emotional health education focusing on prevention-focused strategies for developing youth emotional resilience.

Dr. Viscott included a powerful example from his own private practice in which he discovered a simple reason some patients seemed "stuck" and were unable to benefit and progress during talk therapy. He simply asked those intransigent patients who had "locked" mindsets and behavior to take home their taped therapy session. When they came for their next appointment he asked if they had learned anything new from listening to the taped previous session. Viscott heard a similar theme from many of those non-progressing patients. They confessed to the psychiatrist how surprised they were by how often they lied during therapy about what they were *really* feeling. From that insight he realized how many emotional problems persist by not *owning one's emotional truth*. This prevents emotional honesty even in therapy sessions where confidentiality is paramount.

The essence of emotional resilience is the ability to bounce back from and get over personal setbacks, frustration, and pain. The problem is not dealing with emotional wounds, which left unhealed, leave us stressed and upset. Some think that emotional health is the absence of having emotionally painful experiences! But if we think it through, this simply isn't possible. We are all subject to the human sense of feeling emotionally wounded. But not everyone is able to deal with and get over those vulnerable feelings. My book explains why "emotional dishonesty" may also be handed down from generations of families.

Parents' Role in Demonstrating Naming of One's Feelings

Our school Brain Works Project exercises first focused on practicing **naming** hurt feelings. Before our eyes we observed kids literally "get it". We saw and heard kids describe how this simple coping process helped many of the 700 4th to 6th grade pre-teens who participated in the 8-year demonstration program.

We now know more about the power of **naming** those painful feelings we may otherwise ignore or cover up. Once “contained” by words, the pain is defined. Those hidden emotional wounds lose some of their power in kids’ minds. At first, it may not be easy for even a parent to acknowledge their own painful experiences by simply naming them in front of their children (e.g., admitting it’s often difficult to get over **loss, rejection, betrayal and humiliation**). But by parents talking about their difficulties coping with emotional wounds, they give kids *permission* to normalize this process. These wounds need not remain “secrets” filled with shame and stigma. We all have the same primitive brain alarm system that is set off when we feel we’re in danger. This is our primal survival fear. (Read more about the “reptilian brain” on the website, www.copingskills4kids.net.)

In the above website, the three-part “Coping Brain” lessons show how these powerful, primitive instincts warn us when we are *physically* or *emotionally* wounded. Based on recent neurological research it’s quite likely that the human brain may over-react with stress responses since it can be confused and not able to distinguish between a *physical* from an *emotional* wound.

When families openly and calmly talk about hurt feelings, kids learn to do the same. We can learn to heal rather than transfer our own pain -- punishing or abusing others, which is a key factor why bullying is so prevalent in schools. Language is a developmental ability that grows with brain maturity. Even young children can begin using names for simple stress, such as being “worried,” “afraid,” or “upset”. Since a child’s brain is nearly mature by age 11 or 12, most pre-teens, and certainly teens, have the capacity to use language to represent what they are feeling. This occurs in the neocortex, the highest Coping Brain function. If kids, or even parents, fail to develop the coping habit of “naming” what they’re feeling, it’s more likely pre-teen or teenage children will become driven by primitive (reptilian and emotional) brain instinctive impulses.

Parents are Kids first Coping Skills Teachers

If parents have the courage and take the time to name their own feelings and share emotional experiences with children, they’ll soon find it becomes a normal and stress-relieving process at home and at school. Even before kids ever go to school or have peer pre-teen or teen interactions, parents have great influence over shaping their children’s coping patterns to deal with their own stress.

There are no manuals on how to be emotionally honest with our kids. Frankly, sharing and naming some of our emotional experiences and reactions with adolescents may seem somewhat risky. Parts of parents’ primitive *reptilian and emotional coping brain levels* instinctively protect *adults* by **not** allowing them to show vulnerability in front of their children. But here’s the catch: Being vulnerable -- emotionally honest, first with ourselves and then our children -- allows our children to discover the powerful capability they have to feel and express love, affection and genuine acceptance of themselves and others. Having emotionally wounding experiences is inevitable. But caring and emotionally honest parents can help kids to get over their pain much easier and earlier. ■