

HELPING YOUR CHILD OR TEEN TO DEAL WITH EMOTIONAL PROBLEMS

Summary

Sometimes, despite your best efforts, your child with high learning potential finds it all too much and you are at the end of your tether with worry about what to do. Is it your fault? Are your actions making it worse? Do you feel helpless? Should you bring in the professionals? This fact sheet is about the steps you can put in place to help you get your child back on track.

Introduction

Most parents experience frustration at some stage in their children's lives; whether it is the temper tantrums of the terrible twos or the teenage years when hormones begin to kick in. For children with high learning potential, these emotions can happen:

- At an earlier age than 'the norm'
- More intensely than average

This is very common but it doesn't make it easier for parents watching their child suffer so much that they wonder whether consulting with mental health experts is the only solution.

If you are in this category, this fact sheet is for you. It looks at a ten step plan for what you can do as a parent to help you and your child get through more intensive problems such as extreme emotional problems or mental health issues with or without calling in professional support.

A 10 step plan for you to help your child:

Step 1 – DO remind your child that you are both on the same side.

Despite any problems you might be experiencing with your child, you both want the same thing; for him or her to be happy and thrive. Your child may put a brave, even confrontational face on things, but they may be feeling isolated and alone and you do not want to make the situation worse. If a child feels entirely at 'fault' he or she may also believe that his or her parents feel let down or disappointed in him/her and that this can never change. All of this can add to the breakdown in positive relations and can prevent solutions being found. Even if you feel angry, frustrated or disappointed about the situation you are in, you must keep telling your child that you want to work with them to help make things better.

Step 2 – DO provide limits and reasonable expectations.

Every child needs to have boundaries set and to be absolutely clear what they are. Children with high learning potential are particularly good at trying to negotiate their way past these rules and regulations but without them they do not know where they stand or what is expected of them. It is almost an unwritten rule that parents set boundaries and children test them, pushing them to the limit. But the opposite is just as unsettling for a child, a world with no boundaries where parents do not care what they do. If your bright child with social and emotional problems is good at manipulating around the boundaries, sit down with them or with the whole family and come up with a list of boundaries that in theory you can all stick to. You could even get your child to sign them and stick them on the wall for everyone to see. Whatever these boundaries are you must make sure that they are applied consistently across the family or communicate the reason why they are not (e.g. your sister is two years' older and goes to bed one hour later).

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Step 3 – DO make sure your child has regular routines.

It is really important to make sure that your child has regular routines – including routines for eating, sleeping and exercise. This is easier said than done, especially as your child gets older and this can be difficult to establish. There are many reasons for this, including:

- As a parent, your day could be very hectic; you may have to work late or even work away and it is difficult to get routine into your child's daily schedule
- Use of technology; computers and televisions in the bedroom make it difficult for you to encourage your child to settle down to sleep
- School; with increased pressure on and expectations of homework and course work

To get some consistency in your child's life, lead by example. Make sure that you put in place your own regular patterns of sleeping, eating etc and then apply the same standards to the rest of the family. This will not be easy for any of you, but if you can show that you are prepared to make the effort (and practice getting it right!) your children will respect you for it.

Step 4 – DO give your child encouragement.

At work, if your boss always criticised you for the things you didn't do just right, how would you feel? Fed up? Miserable? Would you give up? Well, think of your child like a member of staff you are trying to get the best from and treat them accordingly. Be precise in your encouragement by specifically highlighting something in particular and praising them for the effort they have put in. This will help to increase the self-confidence of the child who is lacking in self-esteem. Don't forget though that you too have ways of responding to difficult or painful situations e.g. through humour which can sometimes backfire if your child is particularly sensitive.

Step 5 – DO help your child confront their problem.

Whether we like it or not, our children's lives are often filled with distressing emotions. We cannot wrap them in cotton wool forever but must teach them to confront their problems and not feel overwhelmed by it. This is not easy, especially where your child is hypersensitive. However, encouraging your child to confront their problems includes getting them to acknowledge that the emotion exists; understanding what triggered it; then not acting on impulse (i.e. not do what they usually do) and finally to face/tolerate the problem rationally.

Step 6 – DO NOT try to predict your child's future.

Inherited traits, earlier life events and the behaviour patterns your son or daughter has developed can all influence the path your child takes. However, that does not mean that you can predict the future with any degree of accuracy. As a parent you therefore need to keep an open mind and stop thinking that you know how the future is going to be; this can severely hamper a child's ability to set their own individual goals as they can feel restricted by the future their parents have mapped out for them. Do try and encourage your child to be open to new ways of seeing a situation rather than feeling the future is fixed. Help your child to develop strengths to enable them to shape their own future.

Step 7 – DO learn to see and appreciate small improvements.

Your relationship with your child may sometimes feel very negative and improvements in behaviour few and far between. However, it is really important for you as a parent to be patient. Try not to focus on the long term goal of where you would like your child to be but try and see any improvements made and appreciate these for what they are. Forget the bigger picture for the moment.

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Step 8– DO NOT let intense emotions dominate your relationship.

For many teenagers in particular, this time of their life is dominated by intense emotions. Parents can often get caught in these intense emotions and this is where angry encounters can take place and harsh words can fly. If this describes your relations at home, it is perfectly normal, even common, especially when you both regret afterwards what has happened. However, you also need to think about the impact these intense emotions have on your child:

- A child can often feel overwhelmed in seeing such intense emotions in their parent and do not know how to handle it
- They can miss the mixed message you are giving them e.g. you may be concerned or worried but all your child sees is your anger
- Your anger may push your child to erect a wall of 'not caring' or 'walking on eggshells' around you, neither of which is very healthy in the long term

All of this can further isolate your child, making them feel more alone and frightened.

The key to handling this is to calm down and wait to address the issue when your child and you are in a calm state so that you can talk without the conversation getting too intense. In addition, if these intense emotions are getting too frequent and it is affecting you as an individual, why not try the following:

- Talk to your partner or even your child about their experience of your emotional intensity. Ask for their help in identifying when the intensity seems greatest. This will make you more aware of what you are doing and when. It may help you identify in more objective terms any triggers.
- When you feel intense emotions, try to talk about them in terms of how you are feeling rather than putting the blame on anyone else eg say "I am feeling..." rather than "You are making me feel..."
- See the emotions as coming from within you and give it time to let it pass (e.g. count to 10 if you are angry and try and control yourself rather than be angry with your child"
- Do things to distract yourself from how you are feeling rather than shout e.g. listen to your favourite music, go for a long walk or have a relaxing bath.

Decreasing the intensity of your emotions and what you feel about what your child is doing is not easy. However, you need to practice and to make sure you deflect that intensity away from your child as it will not help to persistently reflect angry/sad/extreme emotions onto your child.

Step 9 – DO remember that your child is not you.

Every individual is unique and, whilst that may seem obvious, you need to remember that as your child grows up they will become more and more independent, make their own mistakes and live their own lives. Becoming this independent, self-willed child is an essential part of growing up and for many children this will happen in their teenage years; their bodies are programmed to 'fly the nest'. However, for children with high learning potential, this self awareness can happen even earlier and you need to be prepared for heated discussions about what they want to do and why. The downside of all of this may be that the hopes and dreams that you may have had for your child (that they would be better than you or more successful than you) may lead to conflict when it isn't what your child wants. You need to accept that your child's perspective is different from your own and move on.

Related to this is the fact that your child's difficulties belong to your child and not to you. If you can accept this it may help you to see what your child needs rather than trying to relate it to what you might have needed when you were a child.

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Step 10 – DO take care of your own physical and emotional needs.

Being a parent can be exhausting. Being a parent of a child with high learning potential can be doubly exhausting. But being a parent of a child with high learning potential who has emotional problems can be absolutely overwhelming. You can be run off your feet; never knowing which way to turn being worried sick that your child will never reach their potential and at the same time angry about what your child is – or isn't – doing. Is it no wonder that many parents in this situation experience burnout?

Burnout is physical or emotional exhaustion resulting from long term stress and is very common in circumstances like this. Physical symptoms include headaches, poor sleep patterns, weight gain or loss and digestive problems. Emotional symptoms include increased anger, irritability, fatigue, apathy, increased anxiety, depression and a dependence/addiction to drugs (ranging from aspirin to nicotine) to or drink.

Having the responsibility of raising a child means that it is crucially important that parents take care of themselves first or else they will not be strong enough to support their child during difficult and intense times. This means making sure that you:

- Get enough sleep
- Eat a good enough diet
- Exercise regularly
- Seek out friends and activities that make you feel good about yourself
- Find support for you (partner, friend, counsellor)

It is also important to remember that:

- No parent is perfect – we are all learning 'on the job' and we all make mistakes from time to time.
- Even though your child is unique, many of the issues you will be going through are being and have been experienced by many parents before you. You are not alone!
- You did not create your child's problems on your own and you do not have the power or ability to make them disappear.
- Nobody else outside you and your partner knows what is going on. You may get a lot of advice from others about what you should be doing; trust your gut instinct and filter out the unhelpful advice.
- Your child's problems could have been building up for a long time and may take a long time to improve. Make sure goals that you set as a family are realistic.
- Do not beat yourself up about what you haven't done but celebrate the things you have achieved, however small.
- Take care of yourself; you are no use to your family if you go 'off the rails'.

Further Information Books can be ordered from our website shop: www.nagcbrtain.org.uk/shop.php

P04 Behaviour of Young Gifted Children www.nagcbrtain.org.uk/parents.php?id=92	NAGC Fact Sheet on some of the common problems associated with parenting a young gifted child.
P51 Supporting a Child with Worries or Anxieties www.youngminds.org.uk	NAGC Fact sheet with further advice.
	Organisation offering support and advice for anyone worried about the emotional problems or behaviour of a child or young person.
<i>Help Your Child or Teen Get Back on Track</i> by Dr Kenneth H. Talan	Excellent book containing clear guidance and strategies to help parents during a difficult time.