



7 essential emotional needs all parents need to know about

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When you understand about people's basic emotional needs you can identify what might be likely to trigger challenging behaviour and what might actually help reduce challenging behaviour, and lead to a calmer environment generally.

Taking the needs of your child or teenager into account can make it easier (and quicker) to identify what needs to change or happen to resolve difficult situations. Likewise, awareness of the basic emotional needs allows you to notice what needs to change to make the environment or situation better for *yourself*.

When *your* needs are met, *you* will have a higher tolerance to stress. And the same applies for your child. If *their* personal needs are met appropriately, then they are *less likely* to get aggressive, and even if they do become aggressive they are more likely to calm down quicker and be easier to deal with.

So here are seven basic needs to stir into your parenting mix.

1) The need to give and receive attention

We all have a need to get a certain level of attention.

Someone who feels they are not getting enough attention is more likely to behave in some negative way.

They may feel ignored, and so find it harder to tolerate other family members, friends or teachers and snap at them more. Or they could be receiving insufficient attention at home, or be in a situation where no-one is acknowledging them, so they feel they are being ignored, which could lead to an incident.

Lack of attention can lead to a craving for the attention or despondency due to not having the attention. Some people can begin to change character and play up in order to meet this need, even becoming aggressive. Others respond by becoming withdrawn.

2) The need to respect the mind-body connection

People who get too little sleep or exercise are likely to become more mentally lethargic and more prone to stress and anger. They are likely to snap more due to having less tolerance.

In contrast, someone who is generally happy and jolly and finds plenty to laugh about will be likely to be more stress free and more tolerant to others around them. They will appear to have more 'coping capacity'.

The more stressed people get, the less tolerance they have to physical pain and at the same time the more chance they have of suffering aches and pains and headaches.

A relaxed person will not only be more tolerant to pain, they will also be less likely to experience pain.

3) The need for purpose and goals

Everybody has a need for purpose and goals in their life. Not just for the specific rewards but because we are all hardwired to seek a purpose and to want achievement.

Someone who becomes aggressive will have a purpose or an agenda that they are trying to secure. Depending on their age and understanding, they may not have this formulated in a way they can clearly articulate – just vague and confused ideas of what they want that has led them to behave the way they do.

To keep stress down it is useful to have small achievable goals, whether you are the parent or the child/teenager.

Don't try to do everything at once and keep things in small manageable chunks. And help your child by helping them learn to break things down into smaller chunks too.

Small achievable goals allow a child to have a *frequent* feeling that they have achieved something that is a step in the direction of something they want. Each time they achieve something, they know they are more likely to get what they want, and each frequent achievement is itself something that they want.

It is also important to focus on praising and promoting the effort that has been put in rather than the end result.

Research has shown that children who are praised only for the end result are less motivated to try to reach more difficult goals because of fear of failure (where they won't

get praised). In contrast, children who are praised for their effort have no problem trying to achieve more difficult goals, because they know they will be praised regardless of the result.

4) Need for connection to something bigger

It is a human trait to want to feel part of something bigger than ourselves (whether a religion or a group or a cause).

Your child will want to fit in; they are likely to want to join a gang or have a close circle of friends, and to want to fit in with the family.

How much a child wants to fit in with family varies with age. A younger child will want to please family more, whereas teenagers normally only want family around when they are upset and need emotional support, or when they want family to do things for them.

Taking this into account in your parenting will serve many purposes, including actually meeting many of these needs.

A child or teenager who becomes 'outcast' (whether from family or peer group) is likely to become emotional and feel they don't belong. This can lead to a depressed mood, resentment and anger.

5) The need for stimulation and creativity

Human brains are hardwired to need stimulation and creativity. We need new things to think about and new things to do. When this is denied we get bored, anxious and stressed.

In circumstances where not a lot happens and boredom can set in too easily, people may create 'games' to meet this need, or begin to 'play up' to try to get some sort of stimulation.

6) The need to feel understood and connected

When people get along with each other they feel connected. When a family communicates well and do things together, this need is likely to get appropriately met.

But if a child is excluded from the family, or doesn't get on with anyone, they are likely to quickly get quite down and despondent. A child or teenager who tries to explain how they feel, who tries to talk to their parents but doesn't get the help they are expecting, may begin to feel that they have been rejected, and that no-one understands them.

There are many situations in which children can feel they are not being listened to or understood. Understandably, this can make them even angrier.

The best course of action is to do your best to be as helpful as possible. Agree with them as much as possible – there's always *something* you can agree with in what they say – and if you have to disagree, do your best to avoid saying things like “Yes, but...” as this will tend to put them even more on the defensive.

7) The need to feel a sense of control

A sense of control is vital to all of us. There are many situations, unfortunately, where control is taken away, and this is especially the case for children.

Children try to give themselves some control in their own ways. They may develop rituals or superstitions (like saying something before eating at meals, or arranging things in a specific way, or ‘not stepping on cracks’ or having a lucky item).

The children who cope best with stress and difficult situations are likely to be able create control in their own minds. Parents should give a child every opportunity to feel a sense of control while setting this freedom within specified boundaries.

Sometimes the best way to manage situations and avoid aggression is to give at least the *illusion* of control to those involved.

For example, a parent can give a child a number of ‘options’ to choose from. When I worked in residential childcare, we would offer the children a choice of snacks before they went to bed, or ask if they wanted to be woken at 0715 or 0730 in the morning, and if they wanted a drink brought to their room when they woke up. Or we would suggest that, as they’d been good, they could choose whether to go to bed at 1930 or 2000.

There are many ways to offer choices or find something that a person has control over in a situation. If someone feels they have no control they may get aggressive, so *help* them to have control.

Another example from my work in childcare: a child who would not get up in time in the morning would sometimes be told that if they didn’t get up in fifteen minutes they would have their television removed from their room until they could show that they could get up on time three days in a row. (I would of course have asked them to get up a number of times by this stage!)

This sanction gives control to the child. If they get up, they keep their television. If they don’t get up, they lose their television but they can get it back in as little as three days.

Or they could lose their television for longer if they continue not getting up in time. The choice is theirs, they are in control.

The staff also get the outcome they want, because the child has to learn to get up on time to get their television back and that boundaries will be put in place and acted on.

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