4.2 Emotional intelligence in children

Goleman (1995) states that the family is the first context in which we learn about emotional life. Emotional education operates not only through the words and actions of parents addressed directly to the child, but also through the models they offer them by showing them how they handle their feelings and their marital relationship. The way parents treat children has profound and lasting consequences for their emotional lives. Having emotionally intelligent parents is a source of great benefit for the child. Parents may sometimes behave inappropriately towards their child.

Essentially, there are three types of inappropriate parental behaviour:

Completely ignoring feelings: such parents treat the child's emotional turmoil as if it were a trivial matter or a nuisance whose natural extinction they have to wait for. They fail to take advantage of psychologically charged moments to get closer to the child or to help the child learn certain emotional skills;

Assuming an overly 'let-it-happen' attitude: these parents notice the child's feelings, but believe that whatever strategy he or she adopts to manage his or her inner storm - even physical confrontation - is fine. Like those who ignore the child's feelings, these parents rarely intervene to try to show their child an alternative response. They try to calm any upset and in order to get the child to stop being sad or angry, they will haggle and resort to flattery;

Being dismissive, showing no respect for the child's feelings: these parents usually have a disapproving attitude and are harsh in both criticism and punishment.

One of the fundamental emotional lessons for a child is being able to distinguish different feelings; this ability develops with age (Elksnin & Elksnin, 2003): three-year-olds can accurately identify sadness, happiness and fear using non-verbal signals such as facial expressions, gestures and voice (Nabuzoka & Smith, 1995).

Children who learn to manage their emotions and control their instincts tolerate stressful situations better, learn to communicate their emotional states better and are able to develop positive relationships with family and friends; they also achieve more success in school, work and life (Elias & Weisberg, 2000; Elias, Zins, Weissberg, Frey, Greenberg, Haynes, Kessler, Schwab-Stone & Shriver, 1997; Payton, Wardlaw, Graczyk, Bloody, Trompsett & Weissberg, 2000).

Mischel and Ebbeson (1970) demonstrated how crucial the ability to repress emotions and resist impulse was. The task to which they subjected four-year-old children was as follows: the children had to wait for the examiner to return without eating the sweets left in the room; if they were able

to hold out until the examiner returned, they would receive two sweets as a prize; if they could not wait, they would receive one sweet immediately.

The longitudinal study showed that children who had resisted temptation at the age of four showed greater social competence as adolescents; they were personally effective, self-confident and able to cope with life's frustrations. They accepted challenges and pursued their goals without giving up even in the face of difficulties and postponing gratification; they had self-confidence and were themselves perceived by others as trustworthy. In contrast, the subjects who had not resisted the temptation at the age of four (they were about 30% of the group) had a relatively more problematic psychological profile as adults.

Many shied away from social contacts because of shyness; they were easily upset by frustrations; they were stubborn and indecisive; they considered themselves worthless; they were mistrustful and resentful because they were convinced that they 'didn't get enough'; they were prone to envy and jealousy and reacted to irritation in a sharp manner, triggering quarrels and conflicts. Moreover, they were incapable of delaying gratification. Those who had been patient as children became far better students than those who had not been able to wait; they were far more competent at school. The importance of emotional intelligence in academic success has also been confirmed in more recent times (Downey, Mountstephen, Lloyd, Hansen & Stough, 2008; Lam & Kirby, 2002; Salovey, Bedell, Detweiler & Mayer, 2000).

In this regard, programmes have also been developed in recent times to teach emotions at school. Goleman (1995) describes the experience of a primary school in San Francisco in which the Science of the Self is taught, which has as its object of study feelings, both one's own and those arising in relationships with others. These emotional literacy courses aim to raise the level of social and emotional competence in children as part of their regular education. Teaching content includes self-awareness (i.e. the ability to recognise feelings and build a vocabulary for verbalising them), grasping the connections between thoughts, feelings and emotions, knowing whether one is making a decision based on thoughts or feelings, predicting the consequences of alternative choices, and applying this knowledge to decisions on issues such as drugs, smoking or sex. The importance of these emotional intelligence learning programmes has also been confirmed by Vandervoort (2006), Uluta5 & Dmero§lu (2007).

Emotional Intelligence at School

Learning to observe emotions without getting absorbed helps one to be more clear headed and aware, letting them flow without crushing them gives strength and energy, accepting the alternation of joy and sorrow by enjoying and utilising all our experiences, brings energy inside, instead of wasting it uselessly. In general, however, this aspect is completely ignored in our society, leaving individuals in complete emotional barbarism, with an exponential increase in violence and anger brought about by the explosive mixture of unfulfilled desires and repression. We live in a society where the circulation of information is at a maximum and interpersonal contact is reduced to a minimum: not only between peers, but especially between parents and children. This lack risks leading us to an emotional illiteracy that is worrying, to say the least: we only learn the fundamental lessons about emotionality, our own and others', from interpersonal relationships. For this reason, it is extremely important that the adult (the caregiver) who accompanies the

child's development and educates him or her is present on a daily basis and accompanies the child's development, day by day. Often, this is not the case because both parents work and the extended family is no longer the most common social structure and, increasingly less, grandparents represent a stable, daily point of reference. Therefore, it becomes more important than ever that School Institutions make room for the development of emotional competences from an early age, from Nursery School through to High School, because emotional development begins as soon as a child is born, but is not completed until maturity, and not all adults become 'emotionally intelligent'.

Let's start again: what does it mean to be polite? The current view is that being educated involves being well-informed, responsible, considerate and, many would add, non-violent (M.J.Elias, J.Zins, R.P.Weissberg & al, 1997). It means that the traditional focus on intellectual abilities - IQ - must be complemented by a strong focus on social and emotional abilities: EI abilities - EQ. This is precisely why it makes sense to introduce E.I. among the school subjects and, as Goleman points out:

"Because for so many young people the family context no longer offers a secure foothold in life, schools remain the only institution to which the community can turn to correct children's deficiencies in emotional and social competence... since almost all children go to school, at least at first, school is a place that allows them to reach out to each and every one of them and provide them with fundamental life lessons that, otherwise, they might never receive."(Goleman,1996)

Precisely because most children go to school, it makes sense to focus efforts on the promotion of social competence and the prevention of problem behaviour precisely at school (M.J.Elias et al., 1997). Schools are also an ideal place for prevention because research indicates that low school performance is a significant risk factor for a large number of problem behaviours such as drug abuse and delinquency (R.P.Weissberg & M.T.Greenberg, 1997).

Thus, prevention efforts in the compulsory schooling can protect against the development of problematic behaviour as well as promote mental health. In conclusion, we know that

- learning emotional skills begins at home

- children enter school with different 'emotional starting points' (J.Mayer and P.Salovey, 1997)

- emotional intelligence is composed of a set of activities

- most E.I. skills can be improved through education (J.Mayer and P.Salovey, 1997) therefore, it would be important for schools to face the challenge of teaching, as well as adjusting, the emotional skills of their pupils. This challenge can be supported by introducing emotional literacy among school subjects, as well as by creating a school climate that fosters the development and application of emotional skills.

Emotional Literacy

The purpose of E.I., we said, is to teach people how to manage their emotions intelligently, so that they support and guide their behaviour and thinking. In this sense, we speak of emotional literacy. Emotional literacy is a process quite similar to the process of literacy in the classical sense of the

term that led, at the beginning of the last century, to the majority of Europeans being able to read and write. As Dan Kindlon and Michael Thompson (2000) put it in their 'Emotional Intelligence for Child Who Will Be a Man':

"Teaching the alphabet of emotions to help children become balanced and serene young men... the ability to read and understand their own emotions and those of others. This process is very similar to the process in which one learns to read.... Similarly, emotional literacy involves recognising the appearance and feelings associated with our emotions, and later using these skills to better understand ourselves and others. We thus learn to appreciate the complexity of emotional life and this improves our personal and professional relationships, helping us to strengthen the bonds that enrich our lives." (Kindlon and Thompson, 2000)

Emotional life is an area that, as is certainly the case with mathematics or reading, can be handled with greater or lesser skill and requires a unique set of skills.

This is how Goleman emphasises the importance of emotional education:

"The remedy lies in the way we prepare children for life: we must not leave emotional education to chance, but adopt innovative courses at school that teach self-control, self-awareness, empathy, listening and cooperation. What is needed, therefore, is a real 'emotional literacy' that sets children to live their emotions intelligently' (Goleman, 1996).

E.I., unlike IQ, can be enhanced throughout life: it tends to increase in proportion to the awareness of moods, the ability to manage emotions that cause suffering, and the greater refinement of listening and empathy. Maturity itself is about the process by which we become more intelligent about our emotions and relationships. Observation has shown that the best results in all areas are obtained by those who can consciously use the most effective precision tool nature has given us: emotions. But, in order to enhance or acquire this skill, exercise is necessary: that is why we talk about Emotional Training.

Emotional Training

John Gottman (1997) in his handbook for parents entitled 'Emotional Intelligence for a Child' defines Emotional Training as the basis for a good upbringing of one's children and divides it into five key stages:

1. be aware of the child's emotions;

2. recognise in Emotion an opportunity for intimacy and teaching;

3. listen with empathy and validate the child's feelings;

4. help the child find the words to define the Emotions they feel;

5. setting limits while helping the child to solve the problem.

These five steps are indeed very effective, even when training teachers who will be in contact with children on their growth path, because to be emotional coaches it is very important to apply these five steps first of all to oneself and one's own emotions. John Gottman, in the lines just below, gives several good reasons to take emotional literacy seriously, not only at home, but especially in schools.

"...Our studies show that emotionally trained children perform better in school, are healthier and establish more positive relationships with peers. They also have fewer behaviour problems and are able to recover more quickly after negative experiences. The emotional intelligence they have acquired enables them to be better prepared to face the risks and challenges that await them in life."

We would add that Emotional Training is the tool that can make children and young people experience the use of their emotions as instruments of well-being, security and joy, definitively setting aside the idea that emotion is a bugbear to run away from, hide from or be ashamed of.

Emotional Illiteracy

Having low EQ, poor emotional competence can lead to significant social, relational, personal, life and community discomfort:

- lack of awareness and thus of control and management of one's emotions and related behaviour.

- lack of awareness of the reasons why one feels a certain way

- inability to relate to the unacknowledged and disrespected emotions of others - and the behaviour that results from them.

Emotional illiteracy can expose children and adolescents to a dangerous range of risks, from the most serious such as: depression, violence, eating disorders, drugs, to learning problems and, in less serious cases, purely emotional problems such as: nervousness, impulsiveness and aggression, loneliness. It is often precisely the prevention of these risks that calls for Emotional Literacy courses or even the introduction of E.I. as a curricular subject.

So let's see what the effects of these interventions are.

The positive effects of Emotional Literacy

In the United States, it was verified that children who followed Emotional Literacy courses benefited extensively in their conduct in and out of the classroom and in their ability to learn. Improvement occurred in all classic areas of E.I. (Goleman, 1996, pg.327-328)

An improvement occurred in Emotional Self-awareness:

- the ability to recognise and name one's emotions

- to understand the causes of feelings

- to recognise the difference between feelings and actions

An improvement was observed in Emotion Control with regards to:

- frustration tolerance and anger control
- the ability to express anger adequately, without fighting
- the ability to cope with stress
- conducts that became less aggressive or self-destructive were also noted:
- fewer verbal humiliations, confrontations and disturbances in the classroom
- less loneliness and anxiety in social relationships
- fewer suspensions and expulsions
- more positive feelings about oneself, school and family

In directing Emotions in a productive sense were observed:

- a greater sense of responsibility
- a greater ability to concentrate on the task at hand and to pay attention
- less impulsiveness, greater self-control
- better results in school tests

In Empathy and Reading Emotions there was an improvement in the ability to:

- taking on the point of view of others
- listening to others
- analysing and understanding relationships
- resolving conflicts and negotiating disagreements
- solving problems in relationships and there was a greater:
  - sensitivity to the feelings of others
  - self-confidence and the ability to communicate
  - friendliness and sociability; friendlier behaviour with peers and greater mutual bonding
  - interest from peers
  - interest and concern for others
  - spirit of sharing, cooperation and willingness to be useful to others
  - democracy in dealing with others
  - willingness to collaborate in groups as well as less individualism.

Revision #3
Created 21 March 2023 09:04:06 by Gaia Terenzi
Updated 21 March 2023 09:18:06 by Gaia Terenzi