

That Really Smart Kid

by Brian Joseph

In the first week of our parenting class, we ask parents to imagine what kinds of qualities they hope that their children will have when they are adults. The list usually includes things like Kindness, Generosity, Responsibility, Empathy, Health, Intelligence...

Intelligence? Like... being smart? What does that mean, exactly? Are we talking about the kid with thick glasses and a pocket protector who can recite mathematical equations that make your head spin? You know the one. Socially awkward, bad haircut, a failure at relationships, ill-fitting clothes, knows the capital of every country and always wins the spelling bee. Smart, right? Well, that's an obvious stereotype of one kind of intelligence, maybe not exactly what the parents in our class were imagining. That kind of smartness is sometimes measured in IQ, or "Intelligence Quotient." IQ is a numeric score that comes from one or more standardized tests. If you get a high score, you're smart. Low score...? Hmm. Uh. Well, good try. (It's worth noticing that these tests are mostly created by middle-aged, middle-class, white males. Not too coincidentally, that demographic tends to do relatively well on IQ tests.)

It's a largely accepted notion in academic and scientific circles that there's actually more than one way to think about intelligence. Dr. Howard Gardner, an education professor at Harvard, studied the idea of multiple intelligences, and suggested these eight: Linguistic intelligence ("word smart"), Logical-mathematical intelligence ("number/reasoning smart"), Spatial intelligence ("picture smart"), Bodily-Kinesthetic intelligence ("body smart"), Musical intelligence ("music smart"), Interpersonal intelligence ("people smart"), Intrapersonal intelligence ("self smart"), Naturalist intelligence ("nature smart").

This work has been further expanded to include two additional very important ways of thinking about intelligence. Social intelligence (SQ), and Emotional intelligence (EQ). Since we talk a lot about Emotional intelligence in our classes, and it's an important part of raising children, it's worth a brief review. Here are four key pieces:

1. Getting it. The ability to figure out what somebody is feeling. This means perceiving and recognizing facial expressions, tone of voice, and more. It's about our understanding of other people, but it also includes the very difficult task of self-awareness, when we are looking inward, acknowledging and recognizing our own feelings as well.
2. Making it work. How do we "use" our feelings? Emotionally intelligent people can "harness" their emotions to help them accomplish a task. This is the concept behind many forms of therapy. You talk about stuff, feel stuff, and that's the way to make discoveries that would have otherwise been impossible.
3. Understanding emotions. This includes social awareness. How are all the various relationships affected by the feelings in any given situation?
4. Managing our feelings. How do we regulate and help others to regulate? Even painful emotions can be felt fully, and also managed toward any number of desirable outcomes.

Emotional intelligence has a big impact on all of the other intelligences. It doesn't have anything to do with our kids test scores, but it will help them to cope with the stress of studying. So scores do increase! It doesn't help our kids shoot a basket better, but it allows them to form relationships with their teammates and coaches. So the environment for them to improve their skills is created. Being able to name feelings, talk about them and manage them means that we need to build our skills and increase our sensitivity.

Every time we help our children to name their feelings, we're increasing their emotional intelligence. Every time we model healthy ways of coping with our own feelings, they're learning and building their skills.

So let's adjust our assumptions and stereotypes about what "smart" looks like. Instead of the sit-com image of a nerd, how about the much more nuanced and more inclusive way of seeing multiple intelligences, and particularly EQ. "Smart" can be almost every kid, almost every adult.