

Emotional Immunisation

Most children receive immunization medication against childhood and adult diseases. This is a relatively simple way to ensure children do not succumb to many diseases that can be prevented. Parents often neglect this important protective emotional medicine that children can be given to help them as a child and it will help them throughout their adult life. Children who are given this emotional immunization will often give the same protective factors to their own children, and this helps build a community of people who are more healthy, both emotionally and physically.

I shall list some of the ingredients, though not an exhaustive list which contribute towards emotionally immunizing children. Note these ingredients can be provided by single parents, those in blended families and those in nuclear families. Some of the ingredients seem too simple to even mention, but in the stresses of living today with a 'time poor' society, adjustments may have to be made to family routine.

Give your child time. Time that ensures your child knows they are receiving your attention will promote well being, and high self esteem. Observe any changes that may be happening. Be aware of issues that face a family or individuals when additional time will be very important, such as commencing a new school year, losses they may have experienced, difficulties with friends at school, family quarrels and issues that cause tension in the home. Quality time with your child, will give opportunity to address the issues.

Communicate intentionally with your children:

Planning a 'happy hour' or 'family time together' has its merits, but may be impossible. Sometimes the most important communication is done when you least expect it. Simply spending time together with your children promotes communication such as playing games together, driving to school or sporting or other activities. Have we forgotten the back yard or park cricket game with a soft ball, and rules agreed upon. Many of the board games old and new create laughter, squabbles, and fun, and most of all good communication. Listening to the radio or CD's in the car may stifle good communication whereas games in the car which can be dreamt up by the children create laughter, friendly competition, and make the trip go faster. Eating together, playing together, working together helps communication and assists a child to listen to other points of view, and to develop their conflict resolution skills early in life.

Listening is critical: Listening to your child is critical. Listening also to 'what they are not saying' will also give you leads and allow open ended questions will allow listening to be focused and give more understanding to the needs of children. Simple rule: Two ears, one mouth. Using your ears more than your mouth helps you to be more aware of the problems your child may be experiencing and will help you address their needs.

Have fun together – laugh – enjoy life: Work out together as a family group the items that bring fun to individuals, and join in together. Who knows as an adult you might enjoy something you have never tried before.

Show appreciation, nurturing and affection: Adults are modelling what their children will do in the future. Cuddles, hugs and open affection are important for their well being. Write them a congratulatory card, a certificate from the computer, a scribbled note on the kitchen white board, when you find them doing something worthy of thanking or showing praise. They will model that in the future. You will enjoy their notes.

Increase their self esteem: Open and honest praise will increase their self esteem. Praise that is hollow, will not be appreciated. Children understand if praise is not warranted. Find areas to praise your child. Areas of improvement. A smile, a gesture of kindness, is all praise worthy.

Rules and guidelines need to be fair and applied: What chaos it would be if cricket, football, swimming, driving a car and the list goes on, if we did not have rules. We also know the outcomes if rules are broken. Rules help us to live in harmony. In a home rules should be set, children should know the outcome if rules are broken, and parents need to apply the rules fairly, constantly and with kindness. Children then know what is expected. Praise should be given when rules are kept, not just punishment when rules are broken.

Honesty is the best policy: Children are very intuitive and are perceptive to pick up issues as adults often under estimate their understanding and intuition. Children feel included and important, if adults take them into their confidences regarding important family matters.

Depression: Identifying depression in young children is quite difficult by health care professionals but research shows depression does affect young children. Changes in behaviour that cannot be accounted for, needs to be assessed and addressed.

Grief and loss: Children may experience many losses in their lives. The death of a grand parent, or even a parent or other loved ones. Losses such as the break up of the family unit. Losses are experienced by moving to a new home, attending a new school, moving from primary to high school where long term friends are seen less often. Children grieve differently, and there is no set pattern or correct way of grieving. Children can change quickly: play one minute and cry the next as they deal with the grief they are experiencing. If it lasts a long time, help should be sought from a counsellor or health care professional.

Know and monitor their friends: By having their friends as guests in your home, or involving their friends with some family outings, you can encourage appropriate friendships for your children. By communicating honestly you can explain if you have concerns about friends and their behaviour. Honest communication will help, and your children will respect that.

Margaret Appleby is a pioneer in the field of suicide prevention, having written books and manuals and speaks nationally and internationally. Margaret has been with Lifeline Macarthur since its inception 28 years ago. For 22 years she has been the CEO. Margaret has been recognised in various ways in the community being awarded an OAM for her work in suicide prevention and Lifeline. She has been awarded a Paul Harris Fellow by Rotary. Her life story was written when 18 Australians were chosen for the book, Ordinary People, Extraordinary Lives.