

## Why is it Important to Understand and Develop a Student's Emotional Intelligence?



In order to build a classroom culture that is carrying and supportive of one another, students need to understand what [Emotional Intelligence \(EI\)](#), is and how it can greatly affect the tone in the classroom as well as their personal learning. EI is also referred to as Emotional Quotient (EQ), which is actually a test score that measures one's emotional intelligence.

"Emotional intelligence is the ability to perceive emotions, to access and generate emotions so as to assist thought, to understand emotions and emotional knowledge, and to reflectively regulate emotions so as to promote emotional and intellectual growth." (Salovey, 1997)

Our brains were designed for survival. In order to do this, communicating with other human beings is essential. Humans have survived for eons because of this ability to adapt and communicate with others. Starting with the hunters and gatherers through today's era of shopping online, people have found ways to communicate not only as a survival necessity but for the desire for human interaction and socialization.

A recognized expert in Neuropsychiatry is [John J. Ratey, MD](#), an Associate Clinical Professor of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. He states, "Our highest human virtue is our connection with other humans, and social activity is basic to our health and happiness. Our brains are preprogram to look for other humans from the moment of birth, and continuing social interaction with parents and peers is essential for normal development throughout life" (Ratey, 2001, p. 297). So why shouldn't our classrooms build on this very important factor pertaining to our every-day existence?

[Rex Miller](#) in his book, [Humanizing the Education Machine](#), continually refers to the importance of allowing students to interact with their peers instead have having them sit quietly in straight rows. "...*education* is often a cold, organized, and dehumanizing mass of rules, concepts, and metrics. But ...*learning* is a profoundly human, organic, and ennobling pursuit of personal dreams and progress." (Miller, 2017. Pg. 11.)

In order to have a successful socialization within the classroom, each student must have a feeling that they matter and that they feel valued by both their fellow classmates as well as their teacher. "To build [resiliency](#), we must strengthen a student's bond to the school environment" (Armstrong, 2008). Since many students are disenfranchised with school and have little or no sense of such a bond, it is therefore critical for teachers to consciously build caring relationships within the classroom. These relationships are routed in social and emotional development of children. For further information watch for my article titled, *What does Research tell us About the Importance of Teacher-Student Relationships?*

## What physiologically is happening to the brain in emotional situations?

Our emotions are actively involved when we interact with others. Our *left frontal lobe* for example, becomes stimulated when we have a very positive social interaction with someone... when something pleasant is said or the experience makes us feel good. However, when we are sad or we distrust someone, the *right frontal lobe* is actively involved in the processing of the emotions (Ratey, 2008).

In a highly emotional situation, the *amygdala* will send a message to the *hypothalamus* to “Fight or Flight.” But more importantly, the amygdala is involved in taking the positive or negative experience and encodes it into long term memory. For example, I can clearly remember when my third grade teacher yelled at me for interrupting her when she was talking to another student. She yelled so loud and I was so embarrassed, I don’t think I ever walked up to her desk again. That experience has been burned into my *long term memory*, with a very strong negative emotional tag.

In stressful situations, *cortisol* (a hormone) is released into the body to help the person react quickly. If cortisol and other related hormones are secreted over long periods of time, it can wreak havoc on one’s health. (For further information refer to my articles on Stress.) But there may also be possible destruction of *neurons* in the *hippocampus*, which is related to memory (Goleman, 1996). *Robert Sylwester*, expert in the field of biology and neuroscience, also states that when students are highly stressed and there is an abundance of cortisol, it can physically deteriorate key areas relating to *factual memory* and *reflective systems* (Sylwester, 2005). Stress greatly interferes with the student’s ability to learn and recall information.

Sylwester goes on to state that although the stress response evolved because of physical dangers and was needed for survival, today students experience stress mainly from perceived social challenges and really don’t require the fight or flight response (Sylwester, 2005). When students are embarrassed to raise their hand because they might have the wrong answer, or when they’re stressed in class because of being bullied by the kids on the playground, learning will be affected.

Whether interactions are nurturing or toxic, there are numerous studies that show how relationships affect student achievement (Henderson & Milstein, 2003). In studies conducted with first and fifth graders, teachers that showed warmth and positive regard toward students...that had a classroom culture that was nurturing...performed higher than those who felt their teachers were controlling or cold (even when appropriate academic strategies were used) (Goleman, 1996). Bottom line, you may have a great teacher technically, but if the students see them as uncaring, the student achievement won’t be as high as it could be.

[Daniel Goleman](#) is well known for his books on the brain and emotional intelligence. Being on the [New York Times Best Seller list](#) for a year and a half, [Emotional Intelligence, Why it can matter more than IQ](#), made a big impact not only in the

business world but the classroom as well. Teachers need to understand the impact emotional intelligence has on learning and student achievement.

**The Five Components of Emotional Intelligence** (Goleman, Working with emotional intelligence, 1998)

### **Personal Competence: How we manage ourselves**

**Self-Awareness:** This is the ability to understand one's emotions or moods and recognizes how they affect others (**emotional awareness**). This self-awareness includes a **realistic self-assessment** (knowing one's strengths and limitations) including a strong **self-confidence** (knowing one's self-worth). Not only can they clearly [name their emotional state](#), they also have the ability to [self-regulate](#) it. A self-deprecating sense of humor is also present.

**Self-Regulation:** This is the ability to think before reacting, thus being able to manage impulses, and internal states. These individuals have self-control over their emotions. They are adaptable to change and are comfortable with new ideas and novel approaches to thinking. They maintain levels of honesty and integrity (trustworthiness). And above all, they take responsibility for their actions and their personal performances.

**Motivation:** Being motivated by internal goals, these individuals strive to improve or meet the standard of excellence. They are committed to their work and align their personal goals with those of the group. Taking the initiative, they are ready to act on opportunities. They learn from errors and always remain optimistic, even when faced with failure. Curiosity remains high and there is "...a [flow that comes with being immersed in an activity](#)" (Swijtink, 2017).

### **Social Competence: How we handle relationships**

**Empathy:** Empathy is having the ability to understand the emotions and needs of others. This includes taking an active interest in their concerns and having the ability to sense their emotional state. This individual develops others by being supportive and recognizes, as well as anticipates, the needs of others. They also cultivate opportunities for diversity and have a political awareness by reading the group's relationships and its emotional state.

**Social Skills:** It's important to build and manage relationships. Having good communications skills are essential, including listening, collaboration and cooperation skills, as well as developing strong teambuilding capabilities. Persuasiveness, leadership, and initiating or managing change, are social competencies needed not only in the workplace but the classroom as well.

**Conclusion:** Now that we know what Emotional Intelligence is and why it's so important, how do we develop it? How do we teach children to understand and regulate

their own emotions, as well as how to recognize and react to the emotions of others? There are many books on the subject and I'll discuss some key points teachers can use to get students headed in the right direction. Watch for my next posted article, ***“Emotional Intelligence: How to improve EI in your classroom.”***

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