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Supporting Emotional Development And Regulation In Students With Learning Differences

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Parents and educators frequently struggle to find that good middle ground between asking or expecting too little of their kids or students, and asking or expecting too much. Finding the right balance becomes even more challenging when children have learning differences that affect their ability to regulate and appropriately express their emotions. Many of them have strong and questionably appropriate reactions to even the most predictable demands and frustrations of academic life— things like completing assignments on time, mastering difficult material, and accepting constructive criticism; in turn, this makes it harder for invested adults to accurately read the reaction as either a cue to reduce expectations or a sign that the child needs firm limits coupled with encouragement to impose more self-control and follow through with the task at hand. The goal of the workshop was to suggest ways that parents and teachers could successfully reconcile their wishes to support learning-challenged kids with the need to also hold them accountable for their part in learning and in managing their emotions.

Accounting for some of the difficulty in reconciling these two objectives is what's seen as an inherent conflict between the natural instincts underpinning

parenting or care-giving and the way that many of these kids need us to respond when trying to shift the burden of controlling their emotionality away from themselves. Caring for someone typically involves alleviating his or her distress, or intervening with the stressor itself in order to eliminate it. However, in this context, that kind of action can be interpreted as a loss-of-faith message, and rob a child of the opportunity to build the “muscle” necessary for successful self-regulation and the healthier perspective that often follows.

I believe that most kids can do a lot better than their actions suggest. They do less because we ask for less. Sometimes they do less because we do too much. We need not to help less, but to help differently.

Homework is a nightmare for seventh-grader Andrew, whose poor attention, low frustration tolerance, and difficulties with comprehension understandably make it laborious. But another problem is that it’s also become a nightmare for his mother. Their evening routine looks something like this: He forgets, so she reminds, so he forgets again; she then becomes frustrated and he responds with anger; she backs down but grows resentful of his attitude while he blames her for not being able to get anything done. Wanting to avoid an escalation of the conflict, as well as wanting to make sure he at least gets his homework done, mom overlooks her son’s poor behavior and focuses on calming her son down enough for him to complete the work. *He can’t help it*, Andrew’s mom says to herself, thinking of his longtime struggles with learning. *Besides, I feel bad for him, and don’t want to add to his stress.*

Helping differently means making a shift is from *I must make adjustments to my reaction so that I don’t exacerbate conflict and stress my child even more* to *I need to respond as it feels genuine and authentic, and then help my child deal with that and*

respond constructively, rather than defensively or aggressively. Not only does this protect the relationship from the ravages of low grade, smoldering resentments, but better approximates what the child will experience outside of the home and outside of any supportive school environments. It is, I believe, how we teach our kids to tolerate and manage the discomforts of frustration or anxiety or criticism or disappointing others. No one likes these experiences, but the message needs to be that *they are manageable*. They're also unavoidable—unless a child's world has been trimmed of everything that could bring with it unforeseen and potentially overwhelming challenges. I also believe that it is our best shot at helping kids recognize that not being good at something is not necessarily a reason to avoid it, and that there will be times when they will need to learn things from people they don't like and be supervised by people who don't like them, and that these things are manageable too.

It must always be more important to the children we raise and teach than to us that their homework gets done, they get to school on time, they refrain from being disruptive, they find and keep friends. Only then are we free to let them shoulder the responsibility for making these things happen, with our unflinching support, unwavering emotional accessibility, and reframing of these challenges that expresses the following: *I will never take issue with how you feel about something, only with how you choose to deal with those feelings. I really believe you can do better* (e.g., refrain from being rude on the ride home from school, curtail your tantrum over not being able to get the deadline extended, wait until after class to express your disappointment with your grade, modify your sulking so that it doesn't define the weekend for the rest of the family) *because I've seen you do it* (these things never happen outside of the home / in other classes / in front of Grandpa / when your friends are around) – or – *because I am confident that it's within your reach. And while I respect the fact that it may always be*

harder for you than the next person to control your emotions when you're upset, I believe it's very important that I help you learn to do it well enough so that it doesn't stop you from moving forward in your life. As a part of that, I will be looking for you to make more of an effort to respond appropriately and define your responses as choices you're make instead of as things you can't help. I will always be available to help you with this, but I'm going to try not to engage in ways that leave me picking up the slack for you or feeling disrespected. I really am on your side here and hope very much that you can see it.

Teaching kids how to cope with stressors will always be more helpful to them than taking the stressors away, but that doesn't mean it's easy to do. This approach to helping children who find it difficult to regulate their emotions requires a tremendous amount of self-discipline (to not go and rescue, to not allow yourself to bear the brunt of the child's frustration), attention to detail and compassion (for discerning when a child's level of distress is too high for them to manage successfully, necessitating a change of plan), patience (while kids test how committed you are), flexibility (for times when you need to say, *"You're right, I did need to listen better to what you were trying to tell me last night during our argument and I will be more sensitive to that in the future."*) and demonstrable benevolence (so these kids will recognize that you really are on their side, even if it doesn't look or sound that way at first). But what a gift it is in the end, giving a child the opportunity to see reflected in what you kindly, but, as a matter of course, ask and expect of them, a larger vision of who they are and what they can do and who they can become.

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