

# RAISING SOCIALLY AND EMOTIONALLY STRONG CHILDREN

by Kathy Faggella



The children in our care are really very fragile. Not so much fragile in a physical sense, but in a social and emotional way. We often don't stop to realize that what we say, how we say it, and how we behave with these children can have long term effects for each of them. We need to stop, think, say and do the things that will help children grow in the healthiest way possible, both socially and emotionally.

Raising emotionally strong children keeps getting harder and harder. Children of today have to deal with so much. Their lives are often full of stress from being poor, having separated parents, various homes, physical, emotional or sexual abuse, knowing (or even just hearing) about crimes committed against children, and now, fearing the vague, yet ever-present threat of terrorism.

Our children need some basic skills for coping with the real world. We need to be careful, however. For a number of years, we thought we were building self-esteem by using the blanket statement, "Good job!" for everything. Today we realize that when they hear "Good job," over and over, children figure out that is just something said to everyone. It loses its meaning and doesn't help develop self-esteem.

We also used to teach children about "Stranger Danger." But now we realize that teaching them about "Stranger Danger"

warns them about something that might never happen, makes them fearful of people, and puts a burden of responsibility on them that they are not ready to take on.

The skills we need to teach children must specifically help them become strong and able to overcome setbacks against the problems they face now and will face in the future. In an interview with Robert Brooks, a psychologist at Harvard Medical School and co-author of the book, *Raising Resilient Children* (Contemporary Books) in *Working Mother Magazine*, he states that we need to be more responsive to children. We need to handle mistakes better by allowing children to see that mistakes can be corrected. This will help them be more confident, not only to keep trying, but to recover quickly when something goes wrong. We need to help children find solutions and have good problem-solving skills so that they will not give up easily or depend on others to manage situations for them. Brooks also suggests nurturing children's spirituality so they know there is something bigger than themselves, which gives children a sense of reassurance.

Children who are resilient believe they can be effective; they don't see themselves as victims. They learn how to get support from a nurturing person in times of trouble. They use an interest or hobby for comfort and for building skills and pride. Resilient children are helpful to others, doing chores not just as jobs, but as

contributions to their communities. Finally, these children communicate well.

Psychologist and author, Maurice Elias, suggests that caregivers, teachers and parents need to teach children all about their emotions, what causes them, and how feelings effect others and themselves. Along with knowing about feelings, children need to learn the skills for recognizing other people's thoughts, feelings, and actions. Children can learn to "read" others' body language, tone, and facial expressions in order to evaluate, negotiate and compromise. Children who do this well become effective at turning conflict into a positive force where everyone's needs are met.

Children learn these skills by watching us, their role models. As Dr. Elias noted, children observe not only how we speak to them, but they also watch side conversations we have with others. So we need to be very aware of the impact of our examples on children. We need to acknowledge mistakes and apologize to children and others when we are wrong. We need to make children responsible and accountable for their actions and decisions. We need to intervene, give them alternatives and be consistent. **WE NEED TO TREAT CHILDREN AS WE WANT THEM TO TREAT OTHERS!** In this way, we will be raising socially and emotionally strong children who can make a real contribution to their friends, family and the world someday.