

PARENT INFORMATION 1

The Emotional Highway and Resilience

What is The Emotional Highway? It's part of the metaphor in the *Highway Heroes* program in which children travel along 'The Highway of Life', experiencing the inevitable BUMPS and HAZARDS along the way. These are the twists and turns, highs and lows that are part of every human being's life experience.

As your child travels through life, a very important part of being able to cope with social, emotional and learning issues is **resilience**. Resilience is part of being able to bounce back from adversity. This doesn't mean protecting a child from experiencing the usual things that happen at home, school, in the playground or on the sports field – it means helping them to develop the skills to cope with difficulties.

Andrew Fuller, an Australian Psychologist, explains resilience as, "The ability to bungee-jump through the pitfalls of life", and that's exactly what we need to teach children as they travel along their Emotional Highway.

Resilience isn't just one skill – you have it, or you don't. A child can be very resilient when they lose a game of football, but they might have a difficult time bouncing back from friendship issues or not doing well in the classroom. Resilience is made up of many factors and we need to watch for areas where children are being resilient and create more of them. Telling your child when you notice them being resilient, and how they're being resilient, is very important. Simple comments such as these really help:

- ✓ "I noticed that you became a little bit upset today when you didn't get the Merit Certificate at Assembly. It was very resilient to 'High Five' your friend who did receive the Merit Certificate."
- ✓ "When you missed that goal at soccer practise today, you didn't give up. It's very resilient to have another go, so good on you!"
- ✓ "Even though Sam's been excluding you at school this week, you've still managed to play with other kids. That shows resilience."

There are ways to help children to develop their resilience, and a very important part of the process, is teaching children how to monitor and manage their emotions or feelings.

Feelings happen to everyone – big, small, ugly, exhausting, exhilarating, difficult, challenging, funny, pleasant, interesting... you name it, humans can feel it. As your child grows and develops, they will become more attuned to their feelings (able to monitor them) and more able to self-regulate those feelings (manage them).

This is part of brain development towards self-regulation of emotions. In babies the ability to self-regulate is non-existent. The emotional and reactive centre of the brain screams, 'I'm hungry, wet, dirty NOW!' As your child's brain matures the rational part of

the brain says, 'It'll be OK, calm down, it's not that bad.' This is a developmental process which can be helped along the way by:

1. Helping your child to label their emotions. Saying, "I feel very angry" is much healthier than kicking over the pot plant over. How many emotions can you label – both positive and negative? How many can your child label?
2. Helping your child to understand that they can experience a little bit of an emotion or an overwhelming tidal wave of the same emotion. For example, your child might be annoyed when their Lego tower falls over. In today's lesson, this has been talked about as the Feelings Tank being empty – only a bit inside – or being completely full.
3. Helping your child to experience and manage their big feelings, especially when the Feelings Tank is full. One of the biggest issues that parents face is when children accumulate a little bit of emotion from each event in their day: a little bit of separation anxiety at the beginning of the day, a little bit of excitement during music, a little bit of worry during spelling and so on, until their Feelings Tank is so full that it explodes – usually at home over something trivial. A much better strategy is to teach children to be aware of the feeling they're experiencing, and to manage it as they go along. This will be covered in subsequent handouts.

It is helpful to acknowledge your child's emotions by simply noticing – in words – what you're seeing in your child's behaviour, e.g., "I can see you're finding that a little bit frustrating because you're slamming the pieces down hard." It's equally helpful to acknowledge emotions that might happen - or usually do happen - when your child undertakes a certain task or during particular events. For example, if your child feels nervous before swimming lessons, talk about the worrying feelings, what they feel like, when they happen, and what helps to make them manageable. Talking about emotions helps your child to know that it's OK to experience them, and gives what might otherwise be called a 'funny feeling', an actual name.

Spend time this week talking to your child about their feelings – positive feelings, negative feelings, little feelings, big feelings... Relate them to your own feelings – out aloud - for your child to hear. For example, "I also get that worried feeling in my stomach before I have to give a presentation at work." It's useful for your child to know that you experience the same feelings as they do - and that you manage them – which is the essence of **resilience**.

REFLECTION POINT:

Is there a gender difference in how children are taught to manage feelings? Is there a greater expectation for boys to be brave, not to cry or to acknowledge their big feelings? Is there an expectation that girls will be more emotional and moody? How does this work in your home, and does it change how you manage their emotional reactions?