

Finding a **Skillionaire** in Every Child

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How can we effectively help young people develop their rich potential as they experiment with various ways of being and meander through childhood's novel experiences?

Given that children are constantly changing, how can adults team up with the brain's malleability (neuroplasticity) to foster social and emotional skills?

Much of children's education in social and emotional skills occurs around the processing of difficulties and problems. A child yells at his sibling, and parents, annoyed, comment on the inappropriateness of the behavior; a boy reacts aggressively at school, and educators discipline him, explaining what should be done instead; a girl is shy or struggles with self-doubt, and therapists listen to her, trying to understand and discuss the problem in a helpful manner.

Two decades of research on the brain suggest that problem-talk may not always be the only and most effective way to develop children's social and emotional skills. Take the true story of "Tobbie," who was referred for a second opinion as a last resort before medication.

Tobbie was only 9 years old, but he struggled with big feelings: anger, hate, sadness, and anxiety. Why did he have to be in the same class as Frank? Everyone at his school knew Frank, who had a reputation of being aggressive, competitive, and mean. Frank would call Tobbie a "stupid idiot," would scream at him to "shut up," criticize him in sports, and more. Tobbie was spending an increasing amount of hours withdrawn, ruminating, and crying. His mother, already tired and overburdened by her sister's cancer, listened to the daily stories and encouraged Tobbie to "just let it go" or "focus on something else." His teacher reminded Tobbie to not "take it personally," had organized peer mediation, and regularly benched or disciplined Frank. Tobbie's

first therapist had taught him anger-management tips, deep-breathing techniques, and ways of standing up for himself, all to no avail.

Now that Tobbie was sharing his temptation to retaliate aggressively and run away, his therapist was wondering if she should recommend psychiatric evaluation. His affect was getting worse, and no one knew what else to do. What else can be done?

Brain studies show that intense negative emotions are associated with a reduced blood flow to the thinking part of the brain (Damasio, 2000). In addition, intellectual information learned in one brain state may not be readily available in another (LeDoux, 1996). This means that the more emotionally loaded a problem, the less likely an intellectual idea offered by someone else will be available for recall during the next upsetting event. By intellectual idea, I mean the top-down advice, teaching, or solution that well-meaning adults recommend to children. This would be like remembering your scuba lesson #5 on emergencies when you're a beginning diver surprised by a great white shark; if your brain is overtaken by panic, it may be biologically difficult to access the cognitive knowledge, even though it is in there. This difficulty in accessing cognitive ideas during intense emotional situations is especially true for children, since the thinking part of their brain does not reach maturity until their mid twenties (Siegel, 2012).

If emotions are part of the problem, then emotions have to be part of the solution (Beaudoin & Zimmerman, 2011). A problem emotion, such as anger, is more easily diminished by another emotion, such as empathy, determination, or joy, than by just a thought. The key is to find a meaningful counter-state that fits the problem and the young person's unique experience like a glove. Such a perfect fit can only come from inside the young person's mind, and it can only be found through conversations examining various aspects of experience.

A problem doesn't mean a lack of skills (Beaudoin, 2010, 2012). The human mind is very complex and wired for survival: if there is a problem, the mind's entire focus is on generating ideas that minimize suffering. For children, these thoughts are experienced as a mental jumble of possibilities, which at times may be very difficult to sort out. A temptation to punch, lie, bite, steal, or yell will co-exist with a regulating mechanism trying to limit the intensity of the event. At a minimum, there will be a mental process that raises questions about the choices: "Uh-oh, do I really want to do this? Maybe I shouldn't . . ."

This same mental process also occurs with adults. For example, you might find yourself raising your voice in frustration during Thanksgiving dinner, and at the same time, in the back of your mind, sense a "brake" mechanism reminding you that you

may not really want to do that.

Tobbie had developed the habit of leaving his classmates and going to drink at the water fountain when he was extremely upset. Although he had never thought about this reaction until he was asked about his efforts to contain the feelings, Tobbie reported that it "drowned the frustration in water" and helped him "cool off." Cooling off allowed him to enter into an alternative brain state associated with different social and emotional skills. It prevented the escalation of problem responses. But no one had noticed.

Visible problems and invisible efforts skew adult-child interactions (Beaudoin, in press). We adults cannot see the rich web of neural firing and thinking that occurs in the mind of a child facing a social and emotional dilemma; but we know it is there. Can we boost and intensify those invisible, emerging, or subordinate efforts and skills that already exist in the mind, but only as insubstantial shadows to the problem, and are initially too frail to run the show? We can!

Boosting skills involves having conversations about temptations and efforts that are usually unnoticed, yet offer a window into helpful aspects of experiences. Such conversations pave the way to discovering intentions, preferences, hopes, and values that may be barely visible, but can be brought in the forefront of the mind (White, 2007); connect with powerful

emotions; and facilitate a more conscious choice of action.

Tobbie hadn't realized the extent to which going to the water fountain was helpful to him and why. Exploring the multiple facets of this action allowed him to develop this unarticulated counter-state. Once he became aware of the value of this action, he could choose to do it more often, even before the escalation of the problem.

Inquiring about helpful thoughts and efforts stimulates the neural networks activated during problem solving, and it strengthens skills by dwelling and expanding on the desirable experience of self-regulation. This is helpful regardless of whether or not the child actually chose the self-regulating action.

When Tobbie was able to identify the multiple thoughts and emotions that crossed his mind, he became increasingly able to sort out which were helpful and which weren't, examine what the incidents with Frank meant to him, recognize several of his skills for handling upset feelings and unpleasant interactions, and develop a clearer view of his experience.

The sorting out of social and emotional skills in dealing with Frank opened the door to inquiring about other moments when he might have used similar skills. Tobbie was able to remember handling another set of unpleasant interactions with a boy who had criticized him in skateboarding class. Discussing this other successful experience allowed the identification of what came to be called a "brain shield" and a "sifting" strategy, where comments were divided into either potentially constructive feedback to be considered, or simply destructive criticism to be discarded. Comments came to represent the other boys'

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anger issues, as opposed to accurate reflections of his personal worth. He was then able to expand on these skills and emotionally react to Frank with a counter-state he increasingly experienced as “confidence and determination.” Tobbie decided he wanted to be the boss of his emotional reactions and not let Frank determine his mood and behaviors. Although this shift may appear simple to an observer, it was meaningful and fitting for Tobbie, because he came up with it himself by labeling, noticing, and connecting various aspects of his complex experience.

The mind that generates the poison is the best to develop the antidote (Beaudoin, 2010).

In general, boosting pre-existing background skills allows therapeutic conversation to:

1. Tap into a system of regulation for which the neural foundations already exist. This avoids the pitfalls of trying to implant something brand new, which may or may not fit, into a child’s thought process.
2. Build onto a process that is *already activated and available during emotional events*. This avoids the problem of conversations encoded in one state being un-retrievable in another.
3. Foster *positive emotions* associated with competency, self-awareness, and perspective, which are associated with a more expansive level of neural processing. This reduces the hold of negative emotions on the brain and allows for better integration.

As Tobbie progressively integrated the counter-state of “confidence and determination,” he cognitively “kept the important part of the comments” and “noticed more things about Frank, such as his unhappiness.” He also felt his body become “strong, calm, tall, and powerful”; his

emotions became more anchored in trusting his skills, self-worth, and relationships to caring others. This combination allowed him to tell Frank to “knock if off” when necessary, to stay away from him sometimes, and play on his team (instead of the opposing team) other times.

A true sense of choice is intimately linked to a felt awareness of oneself as being capable of engaging in different viable actions. Choice then, can only happen when a young person’s experience shifts from a place of being a powerless prisoner of unwanted feelings to being an active agent who feels capable of making decisions about what he wants to do and why.

Focusing on emerging skills requires an artful scaffolding of questions to avoid getting stuck in the swamp of “I don’t know(s).” Young people can struggle with speaking about skills they don’t consciously know exist or control, unless they are gently invited to reactivate the memory of an event where those skills could be detected and progressively led down the path of recollecting their inner embodied experience.

If the context supporting the problem can also be addressed simultaneously, conversations with the child on his or her efforts can more effectively build a general sense of agency, hope, self-worth, and self-confidence. A variety of specific skills, such as empathy, thinking ahead, kindness, and responsibility, can be boosted. *Get further information on these processes at www.skillionaire.org.*



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