



## THE GROWING BRAIN

Episode 9: Raising Emotionally Intelligent Children

Guest: Heather Bryant

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How can we raise children who are aware of their own feelings and the feelings of others? Looking for simple ways to weave emotional intelligence into your daily life? Look no further.

**Welcome to The Growing Brain, a social emotional health podcast. This podcast is produced by Momentous Institute, a nonprofit in Dallas, Texas, dedicated to social emotional health for kids, families, adults, and communities. This first season of The Growing Brain is dedicated to parents. We will explore the joys, challenges and mysteries of parenthood through the lens of social emotional health. In this series, we'll shed light on topics such as how kids' brains work and healthy discipline, all better equipping parents to grow healthy brains. I'm your host, Maureen Fernandez with Momentous Institute.**

Maureen *Welcome back to The Growing Brain podcast. Our guest today is Heather Bryant. Heather is our director of Innovation and Impact for Momentous Institute. In that role, she oversees all of our work to share out social emotional health with a wider audience. That includes our training and our research and all of our content. Her background is in early childhood education, where she spent 15 years as a classroom teacher and then moved on to school administration and now in her role at Momentous. So she has spent a lot of time with young kids. And so today we are talking about feelings. And those of you who are familiar with Momentous Institute or have been listening to this podcast, you know that our whole brand is really around social emotional health. And the way we talk about that at Momentous is this ability for kids and adults to understand and manage their emotions, their reactions, and their relationships. So sort of this ability to understand what they're feeling and then how they react to things that happen to them, and then how they form relationships with other people. So obviously one of the core elements there is that first part, which is understanding our emotions and our feelings. And that's what we're going to talk about today. So let's start with sort of a basic understanding of what that means when we... when we talk about kids and feelings, why is that important?*

Heather *Well, we are beings that feel a lot, all the time, whether you're little or grown up. So I think there's probably three important things, uh, that kids need to know about their feelings. I think the, the first is just that feelings give us information, right, that's important. And so the better we can*

understand our feelings, then the better able we are to manage ourselves in a healthy way.

I think the second thing that is important for kids to know about feelings is that all feelings are valid. So I think we can often when kids are experiencing big kind of what we see as negative emotions, right, anger, sadness, um, we can send an unintentional message of, oh, you shouldn't show that, you know, you need to get that under control quickly and that can then have consequences that aren't super healthy.

And then I think the third thing is for kids to understand that feelings come and go, right? And so, um, throughout the day you're gonna be having waves of different feelings all day long. I think for little kids, um, who can experience feelings very intensely, they feel like, oh, I'm sad. I'm going to be sad forever, right, so, um, just having conversations with kids about, you know, you're feeling really sad right now, you know, this feeling is going to pass eventually. Let's think about how we can make you feel better. Um, so I think that's important for kids to understand.

Maureen *Nice. So, in my experience as a parent, it seems to me that kids can have sort of an unlimited number of feelings. One of my kids in particular maybe changes feelings every five seconds. So a lot of feelings happening all the time. Um, but when I talk to my kids about their feelings or kids in general, it seems like you ask, how are you feeling? And there's really two or three answers: I feel mad. I feel sad. I feel excited. And that's kind of, that's kind of all you get. Um, so... how... what are some emotions that, that are reasonable for kids to understand? And how can you kind of build that vocabulary?*

Heather *Yeah. So, you know, the biggest thing is for us to be good models of that vocabulary. And I think very young children, um, you know, two and a half, three, four, certainly can understand, um, more emotions than we think they can, so they can have, like, I think about, um, shy, surprised, um, excited, afraid. Um, you know, if they're hearing those words from their models, their caregivers, um, then we can really expect that they can expand that vocabulary and that's a win-win for everyone, because when you have the vocabulary to talk about it, um, you don't necessarily have to just full-on display every emotion every time, right, you can... you have a way of talking about what you're feeling, which gives caregivers good information about, oh, okay. Cause sometimes it can be kind of hard to tell what's happening when a child's in the middle of a meltdown. So the more we can help them with their vocabulary, um, the better it is for everybody.*

Maureen *That makes so much sense. If I think about, if I ask my kid how he's feeling and he says mad, mad can mean 50 things. Mad can mean frustrated, mad can mean upset man can mean angry, you know? So, so getting more specific with that terminology. That makes sense.*

Heather        Yeah.

Maureen        *And so you said that kids can kind of understand a lot of feelings even at a young age. And what, what do kids understand about feelings?*

Heather        So I think with very young children, uh, feelings are pretty black and white, right. And they can be, uh, pretty overwhelming to young children when they're experiencing a really big feeling.

                    So, you know, either I'm happy and life is wonderful, or life is terrible and I'm completely devastated. There's not a whole lot in between for... for young kids. Um, as they get a little bit older, they can understand more nuance about feelings, right? So it's not so all or nothing.

                    So I can, and they begin to understand, oh, I can feel frustrated, um, and that can make me angry too at the same time. Um, so there's kind of this continuum, right? So that's where that emotional vocabulary, uh, we can call it emotional literacy. That's where that really comes into play for them. And then when they get a little bit older, then they can start making the connection of, oh, I have these feelings. Maybe that person over there has some feelings too, and that's important for me to understand, right. So that I can have a good relationship with them because we all know kids are all about themselves when they're little.

Maureen        *Yeah.*

Heather        That's all that matters. Um, but as you know, we know that understanding other people's feelings begins to develop that sense of empathy, which is so important. And so, um, that's real important for relationships.

Maureen        *One thing that we've talked about in our house is that you can feel two feelings at the same time, even if they're different from each other. So with my kids, I've said you can feel scared and brave at the same time, or you can feel excited and anxious at the same time.*

Heather        Yeah. Yeah. That's perfect. That's exactly it. So, you know, a three-year-old might not necessarily get that, but before they're four, they can begin to start to really integrate that, uh, you know, so it's, it's that nuance. Right? Um, and then I think, you know, kind of going along the developmental line, eventually kids start to understand triggers, right.

                    So they know, um, oh, when I have to... I know that when it's time for say writing, if they're in school, that that's really hard for me, and they begin to connect, um, oh, I start to feel anxious when... when it gets to writing. And so if you begin to understand your triggers, then you can prepare yourself for it instead of just being so overwhelmed by it and you learn how to manage it.

And I think the other thing I would say is that this is a lifelong process. Right?

I know a lot of adults who don't understand their triggers and, um, who don't manage feelings well, um, so it's not like, oh, you should be completely and fully developed with your ability to manage your emotions by a certain age. I mean, I think, you know, there's some research out there that, you know, by mid-twenties kind of your range of emotions is pretty set, but how you manage those emotions, that's a lifelong process.

Maureen *So how would you suggest parents start having these conversations about feelings?*

Heather Yeah, so. It's narration, narration, narration. With young children who don't yet have the vocabulary you want to be just observing and just constantly talking all the time, throwing in the word.

So for example, um, if a kid takes a hard fall, you might say, um, you know, instead of saying, oh, you're fine. Or, uh, oh, get a band-aid. You could expand that a little bit and say, oh wow. That must have really surprised you, when you fell down. You're probably feeling really hurt and kind of scared. Um, let's go get a band-aid and then maybe we can snuggle for a minute and that will help you feel better.

Or, you know, if there's a sibling conflict. I'm sure that never happens with your kids.

Maureen *What's a sibling conflict? (Laughs.)*

Heather Um, so let's say little sister comes along and smashes up the Lego creation. Um, you might say, um, something like, oh gosh, you were really proud of that building and now it's broken and I'm sure you're feeling really disappointed about that. What do you think would help you make... make you feel better in that instance? Um, and then I think too, just narrating your own stuff that's going on. So even as adults, like if we're going to do something like you might say something like, um, gosh, I'm going to try a new workout class today. I'm really nervous about it, but I'm going to go ahead and do it anyway. So just, you know, it might, you might think I'm talking to the air, but you're really not. Right. You're... you're planting those seeds for kids.

Maureen *I will throw in that if you do this with your kids, they may use it against you. My kids have turned and said, **you** made me feel upset. Um, but you know, it's all kind of the process of learning those, you know, I don't take that personally because I'm sorry I made a four-year-old feel upset, but it's part of that process of being able to articulate feelings.*

Heather Right. And that's exactly what you want because when they're adults and in a relationship with someone, you know, the more you kind of keep all that inside, the harder it is to have a healthy relationship, right. So even though it can seem like don't use that against me, um, you're setting them up for success.

Maureen *And the way I turn that around is just to say, oh, you feel upset. Um, just so you're feeling... what you're feeling is upset. Okay. Thank you for telling me you're feeling upset. So not, oh, I made you feel... I would say, you know, so that they're just understanding, okay. What I'm feeling is upset and if they want to assign blame to me at this age, that's fine, but I'm going to layer it back with - nobody made you feel that way. You're feeling it and just kind of building that.*

Heather Right. And I think there's something to be said too, for helping kids, like, okay, so you might say you're feeling upset. I think we should be doing a better job of connecting kids to how that feels in their body, right? So this whole embodiment of emotions, um, I think, and it's easy with young children, right? Because they're just way more in touch with how their bodies feel at any given time. I think we get very disconnected from that as we get older, um, which can make experiencing feelings very confusing when you get older. So, um, you know, you might say something like, um, oh my gosh, you're feeling really upset. Where do you feel that? Do you feel it in your tummy? Do you feel it in your fist? Um, I just think that sort of lays groundwork for kids to understand, yeah, I have this feeling, but it expresses itself in my body and I've got to figure out how to manage that.

Maureen *Yeah, that makes sense. So when we create space for kids to have these big feelings, then we have to be available for them when they tell us that they're having been feeling or they show us that they're having a big feeling. Um, so, I will give an example of how this manifested in my house, just the other day. Uh, I went to, uh, my daughter's room. She had just woken up. She was laying in bed and she was having a lot of feelings and she was, you know, how kids do some days. And she was really sad that I had to go to work and she wanted me to stay home.*

Heather Yeah.

Maureen *And, um, so she said, I'm so sad you're going to work. And I said, I'm sad too. I would love to stay home and play with you, but I'll play with you tonight. And she said, that's not enough time to play with me. I want to play with you the whole day. And I said, I would love to play with you the whole day too, but today I have to go to work. So, but next week we're going on vacation and that's going to be so fun and we'll get to play with you the whole day on vacation. And, you know, the dramatic way, that only a four-year-old can, she looked at me and she said, vacation is the worst!*

*And what she meant by that was you're that's not making me feel any better. First of all, a week for a four-year-old might as well be a month or a year. And what I want is right now, I feel sad because you're going to work and you're telling me about something a week from now, and that's not helping me. And so, yeah. She was having a big feeling. And then she expressed her big feeling because we've created a space where she's allowed to do that. And then I mismatched that by not acknowledging and honoring and responding to the feeling and instead, just trying to make her feel better, which is a natural thing that lots of parents do of course. And there is definitely a time and place to just help kids feel better and move on. And then there's a time where they're having a big feeling and we need to show up in the way that honors that. So what advice do you have for parents to kind of lean into those big feelings when kids are showing them to us?*

Heather Yeah. Um, so probably my favorite strategy comes from Dr. Stephen Finn, right, and it's called the cup and saucer. The idea of the cup and saucer is when children are very little, um, they have very tiny cups, right. And so their feelings, if their feelings are the liquid in the cup, their feelings are going to spill over all the time.

And our role as parents and caregivers is to be the saucer that can hold those feelings and not necessarily try to change them or, uh, get them over it. It's just to hold it and to hold that space with them. And if we do a good job of that, um, as our kids are little as they grow, their cups are going to get bigger and it won't require such a big saucer on our part to hold all those feelings with them.

So I think, you know, if parents can just have the mantra of *be the saucer, be the saucer and the saucer*, um, when a kid is, is expressing, you know, a really big feeling and we're thinking, this is not rational, I got stuff to do. Um, but to just think, yeah, like the feelings are spilling out of the cup. It's my job just to be the saucer and to accept what those feelings are reflect back, oh, you know, you're, you're really feeling upset now. I can tell because you're crying and you don't want to, you know, let me hold you, um, just to kind of like, be the saucer for that and know that that's valuable and going to help their cup grow.

Maureen *Nice. And I like how you said earlier that, that we sometimes that all feelings are valid and that sometimes we kind of diminish the negative feelings and kind of hold on to the positive ones. But that same process, I assume, applies to both. Like, if they're super excited, um, we can still, I can see you're so excited and you're showing me by this and that.*

Heather Yeah. Yeah, exactly.

Maureen *So. There's definitely some work that we, as adults should be doing. Like we've been talking about to sort of better respond to our kids' feelings. And then there's also times when kids have to meet the expectations and they*

*can't just be all their feelings all the time, right? Like you can't just hide under your desk all day at school because you're feeling a certain way. So how do we kind of balance that, um, having feelings and meeting expectations?*

Heather That's a great question. And I think it's something that parents really struggle with, right? Because it's like, well, if we're just all about feelings and you know, you never have to do anything... that's not going to be a very functional adult. So I think what's important to understand is, um, the brain's involved in this. So when kids are in the midst of a complete and total meltdown, they literally cannot access the logical thinking part of their brain. Right? So that's the prefrontal cortex. They are completely operating in that part of our brain that goes into survival mode of fight flight or freeze. So the idea of trying to administer a consequence when your kid is in the midst of a huge meltdown, like, just forget it. That is a no-win proposition for anybody. It's not going to work for the kid cause they literally cannot do it. And you're just going to get really mad. So I think when, you know, just understanding a little bit about that biology can kind of shift our lens as adults and understand that I've got to just hold space, right? I've got to be the saucer in this moment. Get my kid out of their reptilian brain and back up into their prefrontal cortex. And then of course we can have a conversation and discuss consequences, but to do it before then, uh, just it's a waste of time. Like, like don't let it happen. And then when you begin to see that glimmer of, okay, their prefrontal cortex is coming back online, then you can say, let's talk about what happened, um, and, you know, get their perspective. Here's my perspective. Um, and I think an important thing about the consequences is that it has to be logical, right? So you can't just, um, give some random consequence that you think of, um, if it doesn't connect back to what actually happened. So I think that's one piece of it for consequences. I think the other piece of it is that adults also have to understand that their brain does the same thing.

So, um, if you are so mad at your kid, um, you've got to have the wherewithal to say, you know what? I need a minute. Because if you don't, your punishment might be way too harsh for the incident that happened, um, or you might give a punishment that you can't back up.

So I'll give a little personal example. When I was a teenager, I broke curfew. And my mother was not having it. And you know, this, it wasn't just this one thing, like we'd had rough... I'd been doing some stuff leading up to this, but when I got home with my excuse ready, um, she was so mad. She said, um, you... you can't live here anymore.

Maureen *Oh, talking about extreme.*

Heather Even at the time I was like, yeah, you're not going to kick me out. It's not going to happen. So, but she was, she, her brain was completely triggered.

Right. So, um, you know, just give yourself a minute to pull yourself together and then have the conversation with your kid.

Maureen *And you're, you're helping me think of another sort of layer to that consequence conversation is not just, you knocked over your brother's Legos, for the example you gave earlier, you knocked over your brother's Legos and now, you know, here's your consequence. Um, but you were **feeling** this certain way and that feeling caused you to knock over your brother's Legos. So kind of layering in the feeling piece so that they're connecting.*

Heather Yeah. Yeah, for sure. Because, um, everybody's got feelings, feelings are what drive our behavior, right.. so, um, it's not just the kid who was the victim, right? It's the kid who perpetrated that, you know, everybody has to understand their feelings and what caused it.

Maureen *Yeah. I think there's this idea that the kids who really can manage their emotions well are the ones who don't have these big emotional outbursts. And, and I'm wondering if that's actually true, that there are some kids who are not having big outbursts because they're not actually managing their emotions well... they're sort of holding them in or they're not articulating them very clearly. What are your thoughts sort of about that?*

Heather Yeah, I think, you know, you can think about, you've got kids who are really externalizers, right? Like everything comes out, all... it's right there. You can see it. It's on display. And then you've got kids who are internalizers. And those are kids who, um, may be experiencing just as much distress, but they turn it inward. So I think kids with high anxiety, right? Anxiety is one that you might not know that's happening, but a kid can be in a lot of distress about it. So it's important that those, I think those kids can kind of get overlooked, right? Because the externalizers take a lot of attention from adults around them and the internalizers we can think, oh, such a good kid. They're so in control. So I think it's just important that you have an awareness of that and that you're willing to ask, you know, like, just check in with, with your kid every day. And I think if you've sort of built this foundation of, we just talk about feelings in this family, then it's not such a weird conversation to have. Um, but just because a kid seems super well behaved does not mean that they're not in distress.

Maureen *Yes. And let's talk about another layer to that, which is this... sort of... gender. And a lot of society sends messages that boys should show their feelings in a certain way. And girls can show their feelings in a certain way. And we get a lot of these subtle and not subtle messages for boys. Don't, don't cry. Don't show your emotions. Or girls are overdramatic or, you know... so let's talk a little bit about that and any intentional work that you might do differently with boys or girls?*



Heather Yeah, I think it goes a little bit back to what we talked about at the beginning of all feelings are valid and people show their feelings in lots of different ways. And I think we have to keep that gender bias front of mind. Um, and just say, you know, show examples of you know, boys, it's perfectly normal when boys cry, when they're hurt or upset. And, you know, I think on the girl's side we use words like, oh, be sweet, you know, um, be nice with girls. And so that's sending the message to girls that it's not safe for me to externalize uh, and, and show my feelings, um, in a, in a different way, show feelings like anger.

Um, I think girls get that message a lot that that's, that's not okay. So I think you just, any time you can find examples of kids showing emotions in ways that break those stereotypes, it's important to point them out.

Maureen *Yeah. That makes sense. So, so let's talk about some of the really tangible, concrete things that parents can do to sort of enhance these conversations.*

Heather Yeah. So we talked about one of the strategies, the narration, when kids are very little just to build that emotional literacy vocabulary. Uh, I think another thing is the books that you're reading to kids. There are 1 bajillion books about feelings on the market. So those are great, but it doesn't even have to be a feelings book. Any book that you're reading with your child, you can ask questions about different characters. Oh, I wonder how this character is feeling right now. Oh, I wonder how, what that person said to this character. I wonder how that made them feel. Um, so you can bring it in all the time. You know, when you're watching movies, you just get into this sort of mode of, we're always gonna look for feelings and talk about feelings.

Um, another strategy we call externalizing. So this is a little different than the externalizing we talked about before. Uh, what you can do is you can, when you talk to a child about when a child is experiencing a big feeling, instead of saying, you're so mad, um, that might work sometimes, but for some kids, they then begin to feel like *I am mad*, right? Like it's, it's a reflection on who I am at my core. So just a simple shift in your language can make a big difference. So instead of saying, you're so angry, you can just say, wow, *the angry* is really big right now. And so it takes it out of them, like at their core being that thing, but no, that's not who you are, but there is a feeling, right, *the angry*, um, that's out there. And so, you know, some kids even like want to draw a picture of what that angry is or, um, what that excited is. And so just that tiny little shift can make a real shift in how a child is able to engage with you in a conversation about it.

And then you can talk about... you can start to quantify it. Like, so how big is the angry? Right. And so they can show with their arms, you know, how big it is, or you can have, um, you know, a tape measure or whatever, like how big is it? And then you can have a conversation about, wow, that's, it's really big right now. I wonder what could we do to make it *this* big? Not expecting it to go from a hundred to zero, right. But let's say, what if we go from a

hundred to 80, what would that feel like? How would you feel if we went to this size of the angry, how would you, what would you say? What would you look like? What would your face look like? How would you feel on the inside? I think often we expect kids to go from a hundred to zero in two seconds, and it's going to take them a minute.

So this idea of making it like a little smaller, a little smaller, a little smaller is something that can be really useful for kids.

Uh, then another strategy is one that we use at Momentous all the time, and it's the glitter ball. And that, you know, you can take a glitter ball and you can talk about how this is how our brain works and this can help us manage our feelings. So when, um, when the glitter is settled, I'm in my prefrontal cortex, I'm in my thinking brain. I make my best decisions. When... sometimes though, when I have a really big emotion, you shake up the glitter ball and you can talk about how the glitter is everywhere, right? And so this is... my prefrontal cortex can't do its job. I have to figure out ways to settle, get the glitter to settle. And so sometimes for kids just watching, like shaking up a glitter ball, watching the glitter settle, doing that several times, sometimes that can do it, right. Just settling all that glitter to the bottom. Um, but there are other strategies you can teach kids. Like we, at Momentous School, we use breathing a lot. We teach kids what it feels like to have a belly breath, a deep belly breath, how to slow your breathing. Um, so that's, that's another strategy you can use with kids.

Maureen *One that we've done is talking about our feelings, like a roller coaster. It's sort of what you talked about at the beginning with this idea that feelings come and go. And so we said, where are you on your roller coaster right now? Sometimes you feel high on the roller coaster, and sometimes you feel low on the roller coaster, but the roller coaster keeps on moving, we've used that one and, uh, one of my kids can kind of even use hand movements to tell me, like I'm down here on my roller coaster and so we can kind of talk about, okay, how can we move the rollercoaster along?*

Heather Yeah. I think anytime you can give kids like a concrete way to visualize what what's happening with their feelings, um, then, then you're, you're in good shape, right? Because feelings, they're, they're kind of amorphous, right? Like you can't necessarily, um, see them, you know, so you have to give kids ways to think about, um, how they're expressing themselves.

I think another strategy is, you know, for older kids is, you know, take a walk, go for a run, um, do some yoga poses. Uh, you know, I think about a little guy we had, uh, in our school who, um, would get so upset, he would just scream, right. And he could not stop screaming, but if I would say let's, let's start walking, the screaming would stop. And so I wouldn't even talk. Like we would just go for a walk around the building and I would test out like how much of his prefrontal cortex was back online by I'd kind of stop and casually try to start talking with him and the screaming would start again,

right. And I'd be like, oh, not ready. Let's keep walking. And so we would continue to walk until he was able to get back online. So sometimes that movement is, is really important for kids to be able to self-regulate.

Maureen *Well, that makes sense for me too. I mean, I was thinking while you were saying that story. Just the other day, or last week, I was having kind of a bad day and I was having all the feelings in myself and I went for a run and it really just cleared it out. Like as soon as my run was over, I was like, oh, actually I feel all those feelings are gone, you know? And just kind of could, could move it, move it through.*

Heather *Yeah. I, for me, it's yoga. So, you know, if I get home after a really hot mess of a day, you know, as much as I'd like to probably like, let me just have a glass of wine, chocolate, watch some TV. You know, I know that that's not going to work as well for me as putting on a yoga video and, and move, literally moving all that stuff through my body and out.*

Maureen *This conversation has been so interesting and also so important and helpful for us as parents. I think, you know, we get caught thinking about all the... there's so many things that we need to pay attention to with our kids. And, um, you can overlook this quite honestly, you know, you could kind of not put the effort into noticing their feelings and do what I did and just kind of like, let me make you feel better so that we can kind of get on with our day. Especially when you're having the feeling in a parking lot, I need you to not be feeling all these feelings right now. I need to go to the grocery store and we got to get like, kind of moving. Um, so this is so important for us to kind of keep in mind and I love the examples you gave about ways to just do it all the time. And in this family, it's super normal, we talk about feelings here. So thank you for all of that. I love that. And, um, you've given us lots of good strategies to be thinking about and how to do this. So thank you so much.*

Heather *Thank you.*

**Thank you for joining us for The Growing Brain podcast. We hope you have enjoyed this discussion. Please be sure to subscribe for future episodes and to learn more about us and access additional resources and content, please visit us online at [momentousinstitute.org](http://momentousinstitute.org).**