



securing our children's future

 HeartMath®



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Securing Our Children's Future

Just think what the world would be like without children. Imagine adults focused on just their work and each other, without the love and laughter of children. This would certainly be a world with less joy. Children live a lot in their hearts. Their childlike spirit brings out the best in us. Our children represent hope for the future and give indescribable meaning to our lives.

Children today however face extraordinary challenges. The world is in an unprecedented state of flux. Borders are changing. Beliefs are changing. Political systems are changing. Families are changing. No one knows for sure what the future will bring. For millions of people, the bombardment of information from all over the globe is forcing rapid adjustments in how we perceive, live, and relate to each other. Life is moving faster for adults and children alike, and the messages that children are getting often paint a grim picture of our current and perhaps future world. Just for a minute, try to imagine how children absorb and handle all they get from today's information highways — TV, movies, video games, the internet, CD-ROMS, cell phones, MP3 players, and so on.

A download of rapid fire information without enough knowledge on how to assimilate it, often creates overload — which equals stressed children. As a result, the ability of children to find balanced perspectives about life is being stretched to the limit.

Today's children face pressures that we adults never had when we were young. Here's an interesting perspective. Back in the 1950s the major

concerns of schools were behaviors such as talking out of turn, chewing gum, making noise, and running in halls. Today, violence, drug and alcohol abuse, cheating and robbery are major problems that parents and teachers face in trying to raise or teach our youth.

To make matters worse, when both parents work long hours, it gives little time to supervise children or teach them values. Many parents feel guilty about that. They try; but often it's only through words. The stress that parents carry conveys another message. Overworked and stressed parents are passing their stress onto their children, and internal family stress has been shown to greatly contribute to children's behavioral problems. Typical schoolchildren today have more anxiety than ever and one out of five suffers from hyperactivity, adjustment difficulties, eating disorders, depression or other problems that need treatment.

Let's face it. Today's kids have a lot to deal with. So what can we do to help secure a bright future for our children? Unfortunately we can't protect them from life and the changes taking place in society. What we can do, however, is help them create self-security from the inside-out so they can better deal with whatever comes their way.

At HeartMath we've worked extensively with children of all ages. We understand that there are many things involved in guiding children as they grow. We've learned a lot along the way, and what we will share with you in this booklet are some basic cornerstones for helping children build self-security and core values to guide them through life.

One of the most important things we can do for today's children is to teach them how to manage their emotions. Emotions are the next frontier to be understood in order to secure our children's future. We need to give children a better understanding of their emotions, so they can learn to navigate an uncertain world with a solid internal compass. Teaching children about their emotions starts with us, the adults that model the emotional behaviors children will imitate.

So an important step in helping our young people requires that we show them what an emotionally balanced person is like. Children are very impressionable. They observe and learn from the adults that are around them, starting at a very young age and continuing through their teenage years. What we demonstrate will have a big impact on what they become. Every generation looks to their children as the hope for the future. If we want that future to be a bright one it is imperative that we, the adults, give them a picture of emotional stability and solid values.

Here's an interesting fact. Even before a baby is born the mother's emotional state counts. Studies have shown that women who are depressed while pregnant are eight times as likely to have children with a high level of emotional problems, including delinquency, aggressiveness, anxiety or depression. A parent's emotional state significantly affects children, especially through their early years. Once we really understand this, we awaken to more adult responsibility to manage our emotional energy.

It's important to realize that children are born with unique temperaments. How strongly that temperament is expressed depends

on the interactions a child has with the important people in her life. Traits in babies, whether cuddly or cold, cranky or calm, cause parents to respond in certain ways. It is our very responses that determine whether the genes underlying a trait get turned up or turned down.

A child's brain is much more easily molded than adults. When we attune to the traits and feelings of a child and display a balanced, appropriate response, brain development is positively influenced. When a child's emotion is met repeatedly by a response that is disturbed or hostile, brain development is negatively influenced. For example, if we overprotect a shy baby, he will probably remain shy. However, if we encourage and require him to spend time with other toddlers, he has a good chance of overcoming his innate shyness.

The good news is no matter what a child's innate temperament, she has the ability to learn emotional management skills that reprogram her neural circuits. Children who are taught emotional management skills learn to exercise their brains to control their thoughts and manage their emotional impulses. They are laying foundations that will serve them for the rest of their lives.

Here's a practical example of how we can help children develop emotional management at a young age. When a toddler loses or breaks a toy, he might burst into tears and go into total upset as if that toy was his whole world. We wouldn't expect him to be emotionally managed at that age. As he gets older, he'll probably learn that it's really not the end of the world and that there will always be something else interesting to do. As he develops more management, he might respond to a similar mishap with a simple "uh oh, it broke!" If,

however, a pattern forms at an early age where getting upset over small things is “okay,” that pattern may follow him through life—always getting upset over the slightest thing. You could do a lot to help prevent this pattern from developing by helping the child learn to take the significance out of small upsets.

In the previous example we would suggest that it would be best not to smother children with “poor baby” after every little incident. Instead smile and reassure them that it’s no big deal or try to divert their attention to something fun. In this way you are not encouraging over-identity about small issues, a skill that will serve children well throughout life.

An example like this can be applied to many situations. It simply becomes a matter of observing a child’s natural behavior and then showing him balanced emotional responses by how you respond. When parents focus on managing their own emotions first, children will develop in more emotionally healthy ways.

Teenagers of course present unique challenges. Teens are exploring different options, trying to develop their own sense of identity. Spending their teen years consumed in emotional chaos hardly gives them that opportunity. Over-concerns about what peers think, over-attachment to a “love” relationship, over-identity with how they look, and so on, builds a false identity.

Teenagers put enormous significance on these issues. Many live in continual emotional stress about school achievement, dating and breaking up, clothes, looks, cliques, not making the sports team, being

slighted by a friend and the list goes on. Most don't know how to regulate emotions past a certain point. With hormonal changes, they have another set of emotional challenges to manage.

Teenagers crave and need love—and they especially need to be shown what a mature, emotionally balanced adult looks like. Puberty is a critical time in a child's learning, as it instigates new brain growth.

We'll briefly explain. The frontal lobes of the brain, responsible for "executive" functions, such as self-control, judgment, emotional regulation, organization and planning, undergo the greatest change between puberty and young adulthood. Seats of emotional control do not reach maximum growth until age sixteen. So, what children learn between ages ten and sixteen will determine, to a large extent, what the brain decides it needs to know, such as warm or hostile behavior patterns. As difficult as it may be, making extra efforts to teach teenagers the importance of managing emotions is essential to ensuring their future.

Teaching children of any age emotional management skills is, in essence, teaching them how to love and care. It's about helping them to find their hearts. Learning to love is a skill that can be taught. It's at least as important as reading, writing, or math. This can sound soft and sweet and something to shy away from, but we ignore it at our peril.

Children who learn to manage their emotions and develop bottom-line core values will be prepared to be the leaders of tomorrow. They will be able to maintain resilience and courage in the face of change, form healthy relationships, see the bigger picture, and bring care and

awareness to their environment

A second corner stone in securing our children's future is to be more aware of the stress they are being exposed to. The world is stressful and kids see plenty of things that can concern and upset them. It's not to say that we should over-protect children, but creating a home and family environment with as little stress as possible can go along way towards making life easier for them.

Our families are our first social unit. A true family grows and moves through life together, inseparable in the heart. Whether in a biological family or an extended family, the word "family" implies warmth, understanding and acceptance. While we have differences, we remain "family" by virtue of our connection. Family provides necessary security and support, and acts as a buffer against external problems. A family made up of secure people generates a magnetic power that can get things done. The family provides children with real security in a stressful world.

Unfortunately, many families today aren't the secure haven we wished they would be. Families are often under a lot of stress—relationship issues, money issues and the like. Family structures have changed dramatically and have become smaller and more fractured. More are led by one parent or a grandparent or children are raised with a series of step parents. This is all true, but no matter what we can make efforts to minimize the amount of stress our children feel at home. Any efforts made are a great gift to children trying to make sense out of an often confusing world.

In order to reduce the stress in a child's life, it's important to see if you are exposing your children to too much stressful information without guidance. There is a great deal of adult denial of the link between sex and violence on TV, movies and video games and the increase in emotional problems in children. Yet, studies show that watching violence desensitizes children to their own and other's feelings. Observe and regulate what children are watching and help them find their balance. This may require some drastic measures, like pulling the plug on the family television for a while or limiting the amount of time spent playing video games. For some families, this may be the best step to take. The kids will probably complain at first, but it gives children a break from the bombardment of stressful messages.

Most importantly, fill a home with love and care—not stress—and you'll be providing what a child needs most. To feel nurtured is to feel so loved that you know the love will always be there. This nurturing formula draws children to parents and creates opportunities for in-depth communication to unfold. Nurturing love in the home represents a pillar of strength in a child's life, a beacon to come back to. Make efforts to offer more love and less stress and your children will appreciate it greatly.

The third key in helping secure our children's future is all about communication and especially listening. Listening is truly an act of love. We have to listen deeply to children to understand what they are really saying, what they need and what emotions are underlying their behavior.

Most children and adults have been in conversations where they felt they weren't heard. Maybe their words were heard but not their feelings or real meaning. This kind of miscommunication leads to a lack of understanding and cuts off the adult/child bond. Many parents have told us that they simply don't know what their children are feeling, because communication has shut down and their children won't talk to them.

Slowing down and making a sincere effort to listen can help keep the communication bond intact. It helps you be aware of a child's deeper feelings, bringing a more sensitive, essence-based understanding.

HeartMath research has found that good listening involves hearing on three levels.

- 1) Words (what is actually said)
- 2) Feelings (the emotions behind the words)
- 3) Essence (what the words and emotions combined really mean)

Let's explain:

First, when we are listening we have to pay attention to the Word Level: Someone is speaking and we are focused on taking in the words. Unfortunately, we often stop there and this is where most miscommunication happens. Most arguments or misunderstandings are over words said—even when it wasn't what was really meant. Many times people and especially children cannot find the right words to describe what they want to say; some people are simply not good with words. It is of course very important to listen to the exact words that a child is expressing, but it's only part of the picture.

The second level in communication is the Feeling Level. This is where a deeper understanding can be found. What you are looking for here are the emotions that are driving what is being said. For instance, your child comes home from school and you ask her how the day was. She says fine and starts to describe some of the day's events. As she continues to speak, something in her voice indicates feelings of anxiety or sadness. The words say one thing but the feelings another. This is the signal to listen more deeply, which leads to getting at the most important level of communication—the Essence level.

The Essence level of communication is where you get the entire picture—the real meaning—what's behind those words and feelings. To hear the essence, the first step is to adopt a neutral attitude towards your own feelings while the child is talking. You might sense the child is feeling a little anxious or sad, but you don't really know why. Don't quickly adopt predisposed conclusions and start to write your own script. Remain open and neutral.

Secondly, try to appreciate the child as she is speaking. No matter what is going on, appreciate her for who she is. By holding a feeling of appreciation, you will be increasing your own sensitivity, while offering a "safe zone" for her to openly communicate.

Lastly, try not to interrupt. Let her finish. From a neutral, appreciative place inside yourself just listen deeply and see if you can sense what is really being expressed—the combination of words and feelings. When she is done, mirror back what she said and ask her about the real meaning of the communication. For example you might say, "Well I'm

glad you're fine but what else went on today? I'm asking because you seem a little sad. Is that true?" Show her respect and warmth and draw her out. This way you can hear what a child's heart is trying to say—the essence of communication.

Listening this way requires patience and slowing down. It's offering a gesture of care and respect. Children crave understanding. They want you to hear them. As adults we can offer them both by making an extra effort to listen more deeply to what they have to say.

We've presented three cornerstones of effective child development. Now to summarize and put these concepts into practice, here are seven questions to ask yourself and key actions you can take to provide more love and security for your children.

1. Do you often just react to your children's emotional outburst or do you consciously consider the best response; one that models the emotional behavior you'd want them to develop? Children are very impressionable from birth until adulthood. Observe them closely and think about how you should respond to their actions. They will learn their emotional responses to life's events from you.
2. What kind of emotional behavior do you model when things go wrong? Do you blame and judge others? You can help children develop their self-security by avoiding the tendency to blame when things go wrong. Setting an example is the best way to teach children to become self-responsible instead of blaming others for their problems.
3. How often do you have structured time when the whole family is

together in communication? Perhaps it takes place at dinner or time together on weekends. Family time accompanied by meaningful communication creates family bonding. Talk together as a family.

4. Do you have conversations with your children about what they are experiencing emotionally? Ask your kids what they are *feeling* about school, their friends, and their family. Allowing them to express their feelings and helping them understand them without judgment is an important process in developing their emotional management skills.

5. How often do you openly express your appreciation to the children in your life? As an act of care, express your appreciation directly to children. This kind of positive reinforcement is important for them to develop healthy attitudes and self-esteem.

6. Do you project your burdens onto the family and especially your children or do you instead give them a lift? Offering some fun, genuine love and an up-beat attitude makes a child's heart come alive.

7. Do you have a balanced set of rules designed for your child's best interest? Do you enforce them consistently or do you find yourself giving into demands and letting them slide on their commitments? Balanced discipline is very important. Set and enforce bottom-line rules about TV, music, video games, activities, dating, homework, chores, language and behavior. Children crave guidance and discipline even though they may complain. A solid set of rules that is enforced with consistency provides the platform for building self-security.

An aware parent, grand parent, teacher or mentor loves all children he or she meets and interacts with — for you are a caretaker of those moments in time. Working with children can be a very hard job and without a lot of heart many give up, burn-out, let their kids go, or just stop caring. But care, in and of itself, is the most important thing we can offer children.

Care is a powerful motivator. It inspires and gently reassures us. Lending us a feeling of security and support, care reinforces our connection with others. Caring for children has a regenerative uplifting effect. The experience is tangible. It goes directly to our hearts.

The most caring thing that we can do for children is to empower them with the ability to create a sense of self-security from the inside-out. Life will be life and all of us, including our children, will face challenges. Through our care we can help children meet their challenges with balance and poise no matter what comes their way. Significant results can happen quickly as adults begin to show children more care and love, while setting bottom-line rules regarding unacceptable behavior.

Have compassion for yourself and for what kids are facing today. Don't expect perfection in yourself or the children. Be patient, remain hopeful and vigilant. Children can learn love, appreciation, compassion, tolerance and discernment if we teach them these core values. Above all, teach them to love.

Next Steps

Helping children develop emotional management and balanced perspectives in our rapidly changing world is certainly an important

job. At HeartMath, the healthy emotional development of young people is at the forefront of our efforts to contribute to the well-being of the planet. In this e-booklet, we've touched on three key areas that are cornerstones for creating self-security in children, but there is much more that we can offer you. In order to provide further help, we'd like to suggest some additional resources.

Our non-profit partner, the Institute of HeartMath, has researched and developed programs for children that have proven effective in developing emotional and social management skills, and for improving learning and academic performance. You can visit their website at www.heartmath.org to learn more about their *Emotional Security Toolkit™* and other offerings for young people, parents and teachers.

One of their programs is called *Test Edge®*. It was developed to help young people improve their academic performance through reducing test-taking anxiety. Research studies have found it quite effective. In addition to helping with test-taking, *Test Edge* also provides a foundation for developing emotional maturity needed in all areas of life.

We have also found that our technology offerings, *emWave® Personal Stress Reliever®* and *emWave® PC* can be very effective and useful for helping children reduce stress and learn emotional management skills. Children love technology and what better way to teach them the principles and tools of HeartMath.

The *emWave* is a small hand-held device that trains children and adults how to become more coherent. Coherence in this context is a

highly ordered and balanced state of well-being — emotionally, mentally and physically. The *emWave* is easy to use and has a cool look and feel that young people can identify with. Using it with young people is an excellent way to help them develop the qualities and skills of self-security needed to navigate through life.

The *emWave® PC* works on PC computers. It uses the same patented process found in the *emWave* and offers real-time views of changes in heart rhythms and coherence levels as your attitudes and emotions change. It also has fun interactive games that children enjoy.

Both of these technologies are being used in many schools around the country, by professionals working with children and by parents who want to provide the best, new approaches for helping the young people they care for learn to de-stress and manage their emotions and attitudes.

To learn more about tools, techniques, resources and training programs that can help children and teenagers cultivate coherence and emotional balance, please visit our web site at www.heartmath.com or call us toll free at 800-450-9111.

Thank you for your efforts to help children develop into happy, secure adults.

From all of us at HeartMath take care!