

EMOTIONAL MUSCLE: STRONG PARENTS, STRONG CHILDREN

Kerry Kelly Novick and Jack Novick

Here's the perfect holiday gift from psychoanalysis to parents, grandparents, teachers and all who care for children. Here are psychoanalytic development ideas made practical and relevant in the laboratory of Allen Creek Preschool.

What were the qualities those friendly, interesting grown-ups and children were showing? They encompass many personal characteristics long considered desirable in all cultures throughout history. Whether we describe them as virtues, strengths, will, courage, character, grit, and so forth, one common thread is that they all imply effort, resolve, and strength. They all result in satisfaction and sturdy self-esteem.

What if everything you do with your child could include this extra dimension? What if each part of the day, no matter how you manage it, brought added value to your life and your child's development? What if you could build in a dimension that nurtures your child's character, offers wellsprings of happiness, promotes learning, and fosters friendships?

We call this dimension emotional muscle. It can become part of everything you do with your child. And your children can build in the enjoyment of using sturdy emotional muscles, like trust and adaptability for babies, empathy and agency in one-year-olds, bounce-back and mastery in two-year-olds, assertion and persistence in three-year-olds, internal controls and realistic standards in four-year-olds, cooperation and competence in five-year-olds. This is what the book is about.

Everyone needs to develop and exercise physical muscles for health and well-being through their lives; without exercise, physical muscles will atrophy and you'll have lots of aches and pains. When people are in good physical shape, they are less tired at the end of their busy day. Similarly, emotional muscles make the ordinary interactions of daily life smoother. Emotional muscles promote happiness and sturdiness in the face of all life's challenges. Great athletes know this very well. Everyone tends to think of their amazing physical skills, but the athletes all state that mental factors make the crucial difference to their performance. And those mental skills come from training and practice as devoted as their physical drills.

No one gets in shape overnight. When should it start? How soon can children work out emotionally? Traditionally, people have talked about character development in children of school age and older. Our experience and modern research tell us something different: very young children are capable of much more than they are given credit for. As we will describe in the course of this book, emotional muscle can be fostered from birth on, and we continue to have opportunities to develop and exercise it until the end of life.

Consider, for instance, Toko, fifteen months old, who loved his toddler class and the children he saw there regularly with their parents. One day, he was busy with the garage at the far end of the room when he saw his friend Janie hesitating at the classroom doorway and clinging to her mother's leg. Toko went to the shelf and picked up the doll Janie usually liked to play with. He walked over to the door and handed it to her. Janie then came happily into the room and hung up her coat.

At this young age, Toko showed empathy—he was already able to see that Janie was having a different feeling from his and that she was worried. He could interrupt and defer his own play to address her need. He differentiated what she needed from what toy he would have wanted for comfort or distraction. His intervention was effective, and he registered this with a smile as he returned to his cars. As Toko and the many other children we will describe throughout the book show, emotional muscle can be fostered very early.

In 1994, we joined with colleagues and friends to create a nonprofit preschool as a laboratory to discover more concretely what is needed to raise children who will become kind, confident, productive, joyful, and creative members of the community. Toko was a student in one of the parent-toddler classes at Allen Creek Preschool.² The techniques developed by parents, teachers, and family consultants working together at Allen Creek are taken back out into the community to many other settings and situations. Much of the material for this book comes from putting together our personal and professional experiences about parenting with what we have learned as psychoanalytic family consultants. Throughout the book, we use discussions from Allen Creek parenting groups as examples of the challenges parents face and ways they can meet the challenges productively.

Parents and staff at Allen Creek and other such schools help each other to build emotional muscle. Their in-depth efforts give voice to many issues all parents face. But parents don't have to go to a special school or attend groups to become stronger and more confident. Everyone can use the insights and ideas generated at Allen Creek, whatever your circumstances. We hope in this book to offer suggestions from many sources that you can use to build your emotional muscles as parents. In turn, you will be able to help your child do the same.

Some sample comments:

from a parent:

"I've read a lot of books about sleep and food and first aid, but I never know where to look when I have a question about my children's emotional development. In the heat of the parenting moment it's so hard to know what matters and what doesn't and what to insist on or let go. The ideas in this book

really help me figure out what lesson I'm trying to teach and the kind of grown-up I'm trying to help my children become.”

from an educator:

“**Emotional Muscle** by Kerry Kelly Novick and Jack Novick is a must read for anyone committed to understanding how values are conveyed and how the development of character can be supported. Written in an easy to read, concrete, and informative way this book will surprise you with how it takes a very complex topic and makes it accessible and useful. At first I read it with the hopes of improving my work with young children and their families. I soon came to realize that it had a big impact on me personally and in my own interactions with my immediate family members. It is a book I will re-read and reference again and again.”

from a child development expert:

“In this book Kerry and Jack Novick distill their years of experience with babies, young children, and parents. Walking their readers through the various developmental challenges that children and parents naturally face during the first five years, they do for these early years what Erik Erikson did on the broader canvas of the human life cycle in his classic Childhood and Society.

“The Novicks translate decades of clinical and developmental research into plain English, illustrating their points with examples that are easily accessible to any interested reader. Theirs is a practical psychoanalysis that is completely at home on the changing table, in the high chair, and on the playground.

“Their book will be a valuable resource to generations of parents, daycare workers, preschool teachers, and others caring for young children. What’s more, the stories they tell make it clear how, as grownups help children to develop their emotional resources, everyone ends up feeling happier and stronger, better prepared for life’s future challenges.”

For more information, look at the website at <http://buillemotionalmuscle.com>. You can order the book directly from kerrynovick@gmail.com, or at xlibris.com, amazon.com, or barnesandnoble.com.