

*Chapter 5*

**THE DEVELOPMENT OF A CHILD'S EMOTIONAL  
INTELLIGENCE: THE "BEFORE BIRTH"  
PROGRAM FOR PARENTS**

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**ABSTRACT**

This article presents the "Before Birth" parental program based on the theoretical basis of emotional intelligence (EI) models. The program aims to enhance prospective parents' awareness of their own EI in the early months of their child's life. The final goal of the program is to help parents develop the child's EI through effective emotional communication. The basic assumption underlying the program is that emotionally capable parents pay greater attention to their own and their child's EI. Parents' acknowledgement of the consequences of their emotional reactions toward the emotional state of their infants is a major step toward the development of the child's EI.

The program includes three main sections. First, it enhances the parents' understanding of their own EI and focuses on awareness of their emotions and reactions when *they* were children. Second, it highlights the present emotional reaction patterns of the parents. Third, it acknowledges the emotional capabilities of the child by following the continuum of the child's emotional reactions, which will serve as the starting point for a lifelong process in which the child will learn to accurately perceive, express, understand and manage emotions.

**INTRODUCTION**

Intervention programs aimed at preparing parents for the challenges of parenthood have become prevalent with the realization that parenting should not be regarded as 'natural knowledge' and that parenting in a challenging complex modern world should be a learned, informed and constantly improved upon set of skills (Herman, Borden, Reinke, and Webster-

Stratton, 2011). This chapter describes a unique intervention program focusing on emotional skills, based on the theoretical ground laid by the work on emotional intelligence.

### **What Is EI?**

In the last two decades, several conceptualizations of EI have been proposed (for review see Mayer, Roberts, and Barsade, 2008). EI is defined as a mental potential which relates to interactions between emotions and cognition as well as the regulation of self, individually or vis-à-vis others (Salovey and Mayer, 1990). Mayer and Salovey (1997) posited that EI comprises four abilities allowing an individual to: (1) perceive (2) use (3) understand and (4) manage emotions. Other EI models are the “mixed” models (Goleman, 1995; Bar-On, 1997). These models integrate a wide range of personality and behavioral characteristics under the umbrella name of EI. Bar-On (1997) defined EI as a set of non-cognitive abilities, skills, and competencies that influence the ways in which individuals cope with demands and pressures. An alternative view of the construct is Petrides’s trait model of EI (Petrides and Furnham, 1999). Trait EI concerns a constellation of emotional self-perceptions and pre-dispositions located at the lower levels of personality hierarchies (Petrides, 2011).

Saarni’s (1999) model of emotional competence is highly relevant in the current context because of its value for developmental processes of emotional functioning. The model includes eight emotional skills: Awareness of one’s own emotions, the ability to discern and understand other’s emotions, the ability to use a vocabulary of emotion and emotion expression, the capacity for empathic involvement, the ability to differentiate internal subjective emotional experience from external emotional expression, the capacity for adaptive coping with distressing circumstances, awareness of emotional communication within relationships and emotional self-efficacy. Matthews, Zeidner, and Roberts (2012) advocated a multipolar concept that discriminates temperament, information-processing, emotion regulation and context-bound emotional knowledge and skills. Although different, these conceptualizations may lead researchers and practitioners toward a greater theoretical understanding of emotional function in diverse settings (Matthews et al., 2012).

### **Why Is the Pre-Natal EI Development Program Needed?**

Institutional health programs, are preparing parents to care more effectively for their future child’s physical health through teaching healthy life-styles, and care for the newborns. At the same time, an abundant number of mental health programs for the prevention of serious psychopathology in children (Bowlby, 1988), are available through private and state-funded organizations. However, children’s emotional development is overlooked, leading to intuitive approaches in the care and monitoring of children’s emotional development and because of that, in some situations, such care is inappropriate. Thompson (2001, p. 31) points out that *“doing what comes naturally does not always support healthy early emotional development, particularly when caregivers are stressed, absent, or otherwise have neither time nor the energy to devote to caring for young children.”* But, one could emphasize that even in ideal circumstances when parents decide to dedicate much of their time and energy to their children’s development, they simply do not know how to deal with the emotional

displays and needs of their children. Most parents raise their children based on how *they* were nurtured by their parents. This structure of early primarily unconscious formative emotional interaction creates internal mental representations of emotional reaction formation and interpersonal relationship models (Bowlby, 1988) or initial schemas (Laible and Thompson, 1998). If parents acknowledge the consequences of these early emotional reactions toward the emotional state of their infants, they may be taking an important step for the development of the child's EI. Moreover, recent developments in the field of EI, may offer evidence-based 'best practices' for nurturing healthy, adaptive emotional development.

### **Why Is the Parents' EI Important?**

Emotionally intelligent individuals are more likely to practice emotionally intelligent parenting (Mayer, Salovey, and Caruso, 2000). The influence of the parents' EI on their child's EI is supported with empirical findings (Denham, 2007). In particular, the mother's EI has a critical impact on the EI of her children (Guostello and Guostello, 2003; Letina, 2007; Ulutas and Omeroglu, 2012). Mothers with a higher EI display a better ability to differentiate emotion experiences and this ability produces a higher emotional knowledge (Feldman Barrett, Gross, Christensen, and Benvenuto, 2001).

The findings concerning the role of the father's EI are inconsistent and need further investigation. Sanchez-Nunez, Fernandez-Berrocal, and Latorre (2013) suggested that fathers played an important role in the self-reported EI of their sons, but Newton and Thompson (2010) found no correlations between the EI of fathers and the EI of their children. Following the idea of Thomassin and Suveg (2014), the effects of the EI of fathers on the EI of their children depends on the fact whether the mother has a primary caregiver role or equally shares the role of caregiver with her partner.

## **THE THEORETICAL RATIONALE FOR DESIGNING THE "BEFORE BIRTH" PROGRAM**

Theoretical heterogeneity of EI poses a problem concerning how to operationalize it for the development of intervention programs. If practitioners try to design curricula for EI development, they need to commit to a specific model of EI, or to rely on an inclusive list of EI related capabilities. We decided to follow the latter option while critically addressing each component of EI through two questions: (a) which capability is relevant to the program, and (b) how to operationalize each of the capabilities included. Following a systematic comparison of common capabilities in the models of EI presented in Table 1, we created the rules to decide which of them will be included in the program.

(1) We have chosen to include in the program the capabilities that most frequently appear in the theoretical concepts of EI, which comprise three core branches from Mayer and Salovey's (1997) revised model: perceiving, understanding and managing emotions. (2) In addition, we have opted for more specific capabilities and in agreement with Saarni (1999) and Petrides (2011), who conceptualize perception and expression as distinct attributes, we

have included perception and expression of emotions in the program as two autonomous capabilities. (3) The next criterion is that training could have impact on the chosen capability.

**Table 1. The Common Capabilities in the Models of EI**

MODELS OF EI					
EI CAPABILITIES	Mayer and Salovey Ability model of EI	Bar-On Model of emotional-social intelligence	Petrides Trait EI model	Saarni Model of emotional competence	Matthews, Zeidner, and Roberts Multipolar model of EI
Perceive emotions	Ability to perceive emotions	In self-regard: accurately perceive emotions	Emotion perceptions (self and others)	Awareness of one's own emotions	Information processing factor
Express emotion	Included in ability to perceive emotions	Part of assertiveness: constructively and effectively express one's emotions	Emotion expressions	The ability to use vocabulary of emotion and expression	–
Emotional knowledge	Part of ability to understand emotion	–	–	Ability to differentiate internal subjective experience from external emotional expression	Emotional knowledge
Use emotions	Using emotions	–	–	–	–
Understand emotions	Ability to understand emotions	Part of self-awareness: to be aware and understand emotions	–	The ability to discern and understand other's emotions	In emotional knowledge
Manage emotions	Ability to manage emotions (self and others)	In stress tolerance: constructively manage emotions	Emotion regulation—capable of controlling emotions—emotion management of others	–	Emotion regulation: self-regulation
Impulsiveness		Impulse control to effectively and constructively control emotions	Reflective and less likely to give up to their urges	The capacity for adaptive coping with aversive emotions	In temperament
Empathy	–	Be aware and understand how others feel	Capable of taking someone else's perspective	The capacity for empathic involvement	–

According to this criterion, we have opted to include emotional knowledge, which is presented as a distinct dimension of EI in the multipolar model of Matthews et al. (2012). (4) Furthermore, the chosen capability needs to be unrelated to personality traits not under the EI umbrella (e.g., facets of the five-factor and other personality models). Although impulsiveness frequently appears in models of EI as a distinct capability, we have not included it in the program for it is conceptually determined as a facet of neuroticism in personality models (McCrae and Costa, 1990). (5) Empathy is the only EI trait included in the program, because it is conceptually closest to other EI capabilities, it contains all of these EI capabilities and appears in the emotional competence model (Saarni, 1999), the mixed model (Bar-On, 1997) and the trait model (Petrides, 2011).

Our selection resulted in the hypothesized continuum of EI (see Figure 1)—ranging from the basic cognitive-emotional recognition processes or emotional abilities,—through knowledge, understanding and regulatory skills dealing with emotions or emotional competences to frequent or typical patterns of feeling—emotional personality traits. The continuum suggests a hierarchy of dependence among the model's components or aspects, i.e., one could perceive emotions without expressing, understanding and regulating them. But, an individual cannot understand emotions without perceiving them or regulate emotions without understanding them and has no capacity for empathic involvement without all aforementioned attributes.

Abilities	Competences		Traits
Perceive emotions	Emotional knowledge	Regulation and	Empathy
Express emotions	Understanding emotions	managing emotions	

Figure 1. The continuum of EI.

## DEFINITIONS OF EI CAPABILITIES IN THE PROGRAM MODEL

### Perceive Emotions

To perceive emotions is to accurately identify emotional content in one's own and others' faces, voices, gestures and other modes of information gathering (Mayer and Salovey, 1997). In the program, perceiving emotions refers to the ability of parents to accurately identify their own emotions, and the past and present emotions of their family members, as well as to identify their child's ability to perceive emotions.

### Express Emotions

This ability refers to the extent to which a person uses the vocabulary of emotions and their expression (Saarni, 1999). In the program, expressing emotions refers to the degree to which parents explore and gain insight into how they expressed emotions when they were children, how they express emotions now and how their child expresses emotions.

## **Emotional Knowledge**

Emotional knowledge is a multifactorial construct and has been conceptualized as: (1) *emotional implicit* or *self-knowledge*, which is the ability of individuals to differentiate internal subjective feelings and determine that they are angry, sad or frightened (Feldman Barrett, Gross, Christensen, and Benvenuto, 2001), and the ability to differentiate internal subjective experience from external emotional expression (Saarni, 1999); (2) *emotional explicit knowledge* involves social-emotional knowledge on the appropriateness of emotional responses in specific social contexts and developmental emotional knowledge regarding the emotional growth phases of children. In the program this refers to the parents' self-knowledge of their own emotions, and their knowledge of their child's emotional development.

## **Understand Emotions**

Understanding emotions is a discrete emotional ability which means how emotions interact and change (Barsade and Gibson, 2007), or how emotional experiences vary from one individual to another (Mayer and Salovey, 1997).

In the program this term refers to the parents' understanding of the *causes and processes of change* in their and their child's emotions.

## **Manage Emotions**

Managing emotions reflect the process of effective emotion regulation (Wranik, Barrett, and Salovey, 2007). Emotion regulation is the *capability* of controlling shaping and re-directing emotions and their expression (Petrides, 2011) or the *evaluation* and *awareness* of own feelings and of emotion-eliciting events (Saarni, 1999).

By managing emotions an individual attempts to influence which emotions they experience, when they have them, and how they express these emotions (Gross, 1998). In the program, it refers to parents' ability to regulate their emotions and to acknowledge how their child manages emotions.

## **Empathy**

Shulman (1984) presents empathy as a skill which involves the ability to perceive emotions, the competence of understanding the causes of these emotions, and the expression of that understanding to the person experiencing these emotions. Furthermore, empathetic persons use emotional knowledge (see above) to differentiate internal subjective emotional experiences from external emotional expressions (Saarni, 1999). Empathic skills are necessary for parents' consideration of what actions are best undertaken vis-à-vis the child.

In the program, empathy refers to parents' capacity for empathic involvement in the past and the present, and the utilization of this skill with their child.

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## THE “BEFORE BIRTH” PROGRAM

The following is a brief schematic description of the main aspects and stages of the program.

### **1. Parents' Insight Regarding Their Earliest Recollections of Emotional Capabilities**

Theoretical rationale. Social norms determine the appropriateness of emotions and emotional displays in various settings. Individuals *may be aware* of the social criteria for appropriateness *through their own retrospective analysis* (Scherer, 2007).

The goal of this section. Parents analyze retrospectively their earliest recollections of emotional capabilities defined as our EI components (Table 2).

The results serve as a foundation for discovering their own internal emotional working models (Bowlby, 1988) and preparing for understanding their child's emotions.

Final question for parents. When you recollect past emotional information, how do you now assess your and your parents' emotions and their influence on others?

### **2. Parents' Retrospective Analysis of Their EI Capabilities before the Child's Birth**

Theoretical rationale. The parents' EI has an important role in the development of their child's EI (Saarni, 1999). The first step in preparation for that role is parents' *self-reflective insight* (Zeidner, Matthews, Roberts, and MacCann, 2003).

The goal of this section. To enhance parents' conscious awareness of their present EI capabilities which are transferred to the emotional experience of their child (Table 3).

Final question for parents. When you analyze your present emotional processes how do you assess your own emotions and their influence on others?

### **3. Parents Acknowledge Attributes of Their Child's EI after the Child's Birth and within the First Three Years of the Child's Life**

Theoretical rationale. A key skill addressed here is the parents' awareness and ability to perceive, identify and understand the spectrum of emotional experiences typical of early age, and the way they are expressed and communicated.

The goal of this section. To be aware of and understand the child's EI capabilities. It could be observed different emotional information according to the different phases of the child's development. Questions as to the child's behavior vary depending on their months of age at the time of evaluation (Table 4).

*Final questions for parents:* What are the main characteristics of your child's emotional reaction patterns? Do you see similarities or differences between your and the child's feelings, emotions and emotional expressions?

Has following the program's questions increased your awareness of how your emotional expression affects your child's emotions and the emotions of others? Does this appraisal and evaluation of your impact induce a need to change your modality of thinking and behaving? Does this evaluation lead to more appropriate emotional reactions towards your child and other family members?

Having taken into consideration the previous findings that most of the emotional processes emerge over the first 3 years of child's life (Lewis, 2007) and that a majority of the emotional responses are unconscious (Scherer, 2007), we have attempted through our three-sections program to enhance parents' awareness of the emotional interactions between parents and a child in the early phases of child's development.

**Table 2. Parents Analyze Retrospectively Their Earliest Recollections of Emotional Capabilities**

Parents' EI Capabilities	Examples Of The Questions For Parents Of Their EI Capabilities When They Were Children
Perceive emotion Self Others	As a child could you perceive your emotions accurately? Which emotions do you remember first? Did you perceive when you are afraid/shame/guilt/happy? Did you perceive in your family members' voices and/or faces how they felt? Did you know what they felt because of your words/behavior/emotions?
Express emotions Self Others	As a child, could you express your fear/joy/anger openly? Were you allowed to say how you felt? How your family members express their emotions? Was there a relative of whom you could not be certain how he/she felt?
Emotional knowledge Self Others	Could you label if you were angry, sad or frightened? Could you resolve differences between your internal subjective feelings from your external expression? Did you recognize emotions of others? Was their internal subjective experience different from their emotional expression? Were their emotional reactions appropriate?
Understand emotions Self Others	Did you know what <i>caused</i> your emotions? What kind of words/person/rewards/situation <i>changed</i> your feelings? How did you change your emotions from one to another? Did you know what <i>caused</i> your family members' feelings? What words/person/rewards/situations changed their feelings?
Manage emotions Self Others	How did you regulate your emotions? What emotions you could not control? Did you know when your emotional expression is good? Can you remember what type of emotions you caused in your parents? Did you consciously influence particular emotions in others? Could you change or intensify their emotions with your affective reactions or words?
Empathy Self Others	Could you remember your empathetic reaction in the past? How did you feel and what did you do when you saw abuse? Can you remember and explain the capacity for emphatic involvement of your parents?

**Table 3. Parents' Retrospective Analysis of Their EI Capabilities before the Child's Birth**

Parents' EI capabilities	Examples of the questions for parents of their present EI capabilities
Perceive emotion Self Others	Can you identify what you feel with precision and clarity? What is your most frequent emotion? What is your most intense emotion?  Can you accurately identify emotional content in other's faces, voices and other modes of informational gathering? Do you know how other's feel because of your words/behavior/emotions? Do you have the ability to perceive emotions in arts?
Express emotions Self Others	Can you easy express your emotions? Do you speak about your emotional experiences? How do you express fear/joy/anger? How your present family members express their emotions? Can you explain the features of expression of emotions in your family?
Emotional knowledge Self Others	Can you determine what emotion you have? Do you understand the differences between what you are saying from what you are feeling? Ask the friend or relative to give you examples of your emotional influence on others. Can you understand contextual appropriateness of others' expression of emotions? Do you know what to do when someone is in intense emotional state? What do you know about the development of emotions? Do you know how to train children to regulate emotions?
Understand emotions Self Others	Can you tell why you experience specific emotions? Can you explain how and why your emotions change from one to another? Who or what influence these changes? Can you explain what causes emotions in others? Are your conclusions about causes of others' emotions appropriate?
Manage emotions Self Others	How do you regulate your emotions? Do you have capability to influence or suppress which emotions you have, how and when you have them? Can you change the emotion or intensity of emotions of others? Can you consciously influence which emotions they have, when they have them, or control how they will express these emotions?
Empathy Self  Others	Do you have a capability to understand or to do something for suffering others? Can you resolve the differences between own subjective emotional experiences from others' external emotional expression?  Can you explain the capacity for emphatic involvement of your present family members?

Directing parents' attention to elements of their own and their child's EI may initiate the transition from unconscious to more conscious emotional processes and actions (Scherer, 2007). Once parents have completed the program and are more knowledgeable as well as more aware of their and their child's EI-related capabilities, we expect a change in their emotional reaction and communication patterns.

We posit that these changes will elicit emotionally-adaptive behaviors and actions. Such change sets the foundation for the development of their child's EI.

**Table 4. Parents Acknowledge Their Child's EI Related Capabilities**

Childs' EI capabilities	Examples of the questions for parents of their child's EI capabilities
Perceive emotion Self	Does your child perceive your emotions? Can you identify what your infant feels with precision and clarity? What are her/his most frequent emotions? Could you rate how strongly this emotion is experienced? What is his/her most intense fear?
Others	Does he/she have ability to perceive emotions conveyed in children's stories or playing 'pretend' with toys?
Express emotions Self	Can your child easily express his/her emotions? How does he/she express fear/joy/anger?
Others	Do you observe that your child changes his/her behavior when you change your emotional expression?
Emotional knowledge Self	Does he/she notice the relationship between body language and emotional experiences? Can he/she identify basic emotion categories such as anger, fear and happiness?
Others	Does he/she label emotions of others? Do you help your child find the right words that express what they're feeling?
Understand emotions Self	Does your child understand why people experience certain emotions? What is his/her sources of disappointment? Are his/her fear a product of feeling danger, sadness of loss?
Others	Do you help your child to understand the causes of emotions of others?
Manage emotions Self	How does he/she handle their own emotions? Does your child have the ability to regulate negative emotions?
Others	If he/she capable to consciously change the emotional states of others? Does he/she try to change the 'pretend' emotions of their pets or toys?
Empathy Self	Does your child have a capability for empathic involvement? (age-appropriate examples are provided)
Others	Do you observe that he/she is crying or changing behavior because of the suffering of other people, animals or toys? Does he/she try to help?

## CONCLUSION

This chapter presents the "Before Birth" program for parents' preparation. The program is based on a few assumptions proposing that: (1) New parents are challenged by their newborn's emotional reactions and are often experiencing difficulties and frustration around their attempts to decipher their newborns' messages and cues. (2) The parents' own emotional makeup, originating in their own childhood and shaped over their life-time is key to their own coping style and the messages they send (consciously and sub consciously) to their child, and (3) Focusing on early childhood emotional experiences is key to providing a safe and effective basis for emotional development through the life cycle.

The program is new and has not been implemented yet. It concerns a very important practical need stemming from the fact that parents often may not be aware of their emotional influence on their infant's emotional growth. In some cases, the parents' emotions and emotional expressions could unconsciously produce negative emotions and/or negative self-values in their children.

The program offers novelty in that it follows the theoretical rationale of the EI continuum with an inclusive list of EI elements chosen for theoretical and practical relevance. The included elements are common in the majority of models of EI.

The program's goal is to lay the foundations to develop EI in young children (from birth) by initiating parental retrospective analysis and self-reflective insight of their past and present emotional experience, as well as by helping parents understand the child's emotional experience.

Once parents have completed the program and are aware more of their and their child's EI related experiences and capabilities, we expect a change in their emotional reaction and communication patterns. We posit that these changes will elicit emotionally-adaptive behaviors and actions. Such change sets the foundation for the development of their child's EI.

Future research will be needed to evaluate and validate our model and the potential impact on a child's EI as a result of instituting this program. We propose that the coherent and focused theoretical structure immersed in EI theory, will help lead and conduct effective research to validate the presented program and explore its effectiveness from various perspectives.

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