

Emotional Intelligence

What is a genius? The image that comes to mind is a person with an extraordinarily high IQ, the recipient of a Nobel Prize, or the discoverer of the cure for a deadly disease. Most people believe that such a person possesses the "right" blend of genetically endowed intelligence, a supportive social background, and a good work ethic, among other things.



Profiles of Faces,
by Lisa Zador
Arville

Now try to envision how to create an emotional genius. How can parents, teachers, coaches, and managers pass along the skills necessary to be emotionally successful? Although researchers studying emotional intelligence (EI) have made significant advances, fostering emotional genius still seems difficult.

One of the first problems, defining what an emotional genius should look like, is at the heart of recent debates between researchers who study EI. What types of people should score highest on a test of EI? Are they sensitive to the feelings of others? Are they kind? Are they Machiavellian, accustomed to using their emotional skills to manipulate others? Or are they inherently good to others?

Our approach focuses on four fundamental emotional abilities (identifying emotions, using them to help us think, understanding emotional knowledge, and managing emotions in ourselves and in others). We do not claim that possessing these emotional skills makes one a "good person" (they may be necessary but not sufficient). By limiting the definition of EI, we are able to study the differences in

emotion-related abilities and leave the study of other important psychological phenomena (such as differences in personality or moral development) to experts in those areas.

A second problem is that emotional skills are notoriously difficult to measure. Most instruments designed to assess EI simply ask individuals to report how good they are at managing their emotions. This is akin to an IQ test that asks the takers how intelligent they are.

We have developed a performance-based test of EI (the Mayer-Salovey-Caruso Emotional Intelligence Test, or MSCEIT), in which individuals are asked to answer questions that target the four essential branches of EI. Although we believe these types of questions are the best way to measure EI, they raise questions of their own, such as what constitutes a correct answer. For now, the "right" answer is determined by comparing an individual's score against the average of all who have taken a given test, or by pooling the answers produced by experts in the emotions area. But can there be different "right" answers in different cultures, or within the same culture? Can very creative people score lower on such a test because they don't match the broad consensus? These questions remain central to the advancement of EI research.

Given these problems, we cannot yet provide a definitive guide for fostering EI. Nonetheless, there are some basic strategies for developing the various skills that it comprises. For instance, providing a rich emotional environment (a setting in which to talk about emotions, show how one feels, or point out how others feel) is vital to the growth of emotional understanding. Talking to children about how they feel, for instance, not only helps them identify emotions in themselves but gives them a repertoire of emotional terms with which to understand others. Learning how to express one's emotions constructively also makes it possible for others to respond appropriately: if others don't know how you feel, they can't do much about it.

Learning how to identify one's own and others' emotions can also aid in managing them, perhaps the most important branch of EI. There are concrete strate-

gies for managing emotions (e.g., exercising, listening to music, seeking social support, going for a drive), just as there are for teaching any skill.

Although we are skeptical of sure-fire ways to increase EI, we believe that research is adding greatly to our understanding of how to improve emotional skills. Studies now in progress around the world will shed light on what kinds of people are emotionally intelligent, how they became that way, and how we might improve the EI of others. We hope that these studies will yield more concrete and reliable strategies to create emotional geniuses at home, in the workplace, and in the classroom.

—David Pizarro, Ph.D., and
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Further Reading

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Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More than IQ, by Daniel Goleman, Bantam, 1997