FOR AUSTRALIAN HOMESCHOOLING FAMILIES · HOMESCHOOL-HQ

Growing Social-Emotional Skills
everyday life first, lessons when needed

How children learn to handle feelings, get along and make good choices, and why the best approach sits somewhere between 1975 and today.

Two ways of looking at it

Ask anyone who went to school in the 1970s and they'll tell you nobody taught them about feelings. There were no calm-down corners or feelings charts. Many of those children grew up able to cope, make friends and work through problems.

Today, schools teach these skills directly, with programs, scripts and daily check-ins. Supporters point to research showing real benefits. Critics worry that children are now taught to examine every feeling so closely that ordinary ups and downs start to feel like problems.

> Both sides have a point. Children have always learned these skills, mostly from everyday life. Some children, at some moments, also need them taught directly. Getting the balance right is the real skill for parents.

What the research says, in plain terms

1970S AND 80S

Children of the 1970s and 80s

- **These skills mattered then too.** New Zealand's Dunedin study has followed about 1,000 children born in 1972 and 1973. Those with less self-control in their first ten years were more likely, at 32, to have health problems, addictions, money troubles and criminal records, even allowing for IQ and family background. Children whose self-control improved as they grew did better than predicted. Nobody taught it in lessons, but not every child picked it up either.
- **Anxiety was already rising.** Studies of American children between 1952 and 1993 found ordinary schoolchildren in the 1980s reported more anxiety than child psychiatric patients in the 1950s. The researcher linked it to weaker community ties and more perceived threats. The rise began long before feelings lessons existed.
- **Young men were struggling.** In Australia, the suicide rate for males aged 15 to 24 more than doubled between the mid-1960s and the late 1990s, the years those children were growing up.

- **Hard knocks were normal.** Smacking was standard: 64% of Australian parents aged 65 and over have used physical punishment, compared with 14% of parents aged 16 to 24. Bullying was common too. In a British group of children born in 1958, 28% were bullied sometimes and 15% often, and the effects on health, income and relationships still showed at age 50.
- **But they had far more freedom.** In 1991, 61% of Australian children travelled to school on their own. By 2012 it was 32%. Children of the 1970s and 80s spent hours playing outside, in mixed-age groups, sorting out their own problems with no adult in sight.

1990S AND 2000S

Children of the 1990s and 2000s: today's parents

- **Freedom kept shrinking.** The share of Australian children aged 10 and under allowed to walk home from school alone fell from 68% in 1991 to 50% just two years later, and kept falling. Busier roads and fear of strangers kept children closer to home.
- **Parents spent far more time with their children.** Across 11 Western countries, including the UK, US and Canada, mothers' daily childcare time almost doubled between 1965 and 2012, and fathers' nearly quadrupled. Researchers link this to "intensive parenting": the belief that every minute of parent time shapes a child's future.
- **The self-esteem movement.** Through the late 1980s and 90s, schools and parents were encouraged to boost children's self-esteem with praise and rewards. A major 2003 review found it didn't improve school results or behaviour. Doing well tended to build self-esteem, not the other way round.
- **Gentler discipline and more talk about feelings.** Smacking became less common, and Australian schools began whole-school mental health programs. This was the first generation to grow up with feelings talked about openly.
- **Screens arrived, but slowly.** TV, game consoles and home computers were part of childhood. Most of this generation grew up before smartphones and social media.

PARENTS NOW

Those children as parents

- **Under real pressure.** In a 2024 survey of more than 8,000 Australian parents, 42% said rising living costs had affected their ability to be a calm, loving parent. More than 8 in 10 said they yell at their children, and nearly two-thirds felt guilty every week about the time they spend with their child.
- **Warm, but sometimes too protective.** Many of today's parents want to do better than the smacking and silence of earlier generations. Warmth plus clear limits, which researchers call authoritative parenting, has strong evidence behind it. "Gentle parenting" rests on many of the same ideas, but when it slides into few or no limits, the evidence doesn't support it.
- **Protecting a worried child can keep the worry going.** Parents often rearrange family life to spare an anxious child distress: constant reassurance, avoiding situations, speaking for them. A Yale trial found that coaching parents to gently reduce this worked as well as therapy for the child.

- **Room to do things alone matters.** A review of parenting and child anxiety found the strongest link was with giving children too little room to do things for themselves. Parenting was only a small part of the picture, though. Temperament and other influences matter more. This isn't about blame.

TODAY

Children today

- **Young people's mental health has got worse.** Among Australians aged 16 to 24, diagnosable mental health conditions rose from 23% in 2007 to 36% in 2022, and anxiety disorders more than doubled. The researchers say this isn't explained by people simply being more willing to report problems. The causes are still debated: money and housing pressure, COVID, and phones and social media are all in the mix.
- **School programs help, modestly.** Large reviews of hundreds of studies find that teaching these skills improves behaviour, wellbeing and schoolwork on average. The gains are smaller in big, independent studies than in the program designers' own trials. Children without good examples at home tend to benefit most.
- **More isn't always better.** A large UK trial that taught mindfulness to about 8,000 secondary students found no benefit over normal school. Some researchers have suggested that constant mental health messages might lead some young people to see normal sadness or nerves as illness. That idea is still being tested, and other researchers disagree, but it's a fair warning against overdoing it.
- **Resilience comes from ordinary life.** Resilience researcher Ann Masten calls it "ordinary magic": caring adults, close relationships and everyday chances to solve problems, rather than special programs.

What this changes

1970s and 80s

Freedom, play and responsibility, but feelings went unspoken and hard knocks were normal.

1990s and 2000s

More attention, more praise and gentler discipline, but less freedom.

Parents today

Trying to do better again, often under heavy pressure and with little time to spare.

Across three generations, the pendulum has swung. Children of the 1970s and 80s had freedom, play and responsibility, but feelings went unspoken and hard knocks were normal. Children of the 1990s and 2000s got more attention, more praise and gentler discipline, but less freedom. Many of them are now parents trying to do better again, often under heavy pressure and with little time to spare.

These skills matter a great deal and can improve, so leaving them to chance isn't enough. Neither is protecting children from every struggle. The middle path takes the best of each era: the freedom and real responsibility of the 70s and 80s, the warmth and openness of the 90s and 2000s, and today's research, without the silence, the smacking or the over-protection.

The five skills

Most programs group these skills into five areas. In plain English:

1. **Knowing your feelings:** noticing and naming what you feel.
2. **Managing your feelings:** calming down, waiting, sticking with something hard.
3. **Reading other people:** noticing how others feel and seeing their side.
4. **Getting along:** sharing, taking turns, sorting out disagreements, being a good friend.
5. **Making good choices:** thinking ahead, knowing right from wrong, owning your mistakes.

Where everyday life does the teaching

Most of these skills grow naturally when children have the right experiences. Lessons work best as a top-up, not a replacement.

Skill	Everyday life teaches it through	A little direct teaching helps when
Knowing your feelings	Stories read together, family conversations, adults naming their own feelings	A child has big reactions but no words for them
Managing your feelings	Waiting for a turn, losing at board games, finishing chores, cooking and gardening	Meltdowns are frequent, long or getting bigger
Reading other people	Mixed-age play, caring for pets or younger children, talking about characters in books	A child often misses how others feel, even when it's pointed out
Getting along	Free play, siblings, team sports, clubs, sorting out their own small fights	Conflicts always end in hitting, or a child is often left out
Making good choices	Real jobs at home, pocket money, natural consequences	The same poor choice keeps repeating despite consequences

Age by age

Ages 3 to 5

Let everyday life do the work: name feelings as they happen ("You look cross"), read stories and talk about how the characters feel, play turn-taking games, and give small jobs like setting the table.

Teach directly when needed: a simple calming trick, like smelling the flower and blowing out the candle. Practise it when they're calm, so they can use it when they're upset. Use a timer for turns with a favourite toy.

Ages 5 to 7

Let everyday life do the work: board games where they sometimes lose, playing with other children with less adult refereeing, and talking about why rules exist when they come up.

Teach directly when needed: a simple way to sort out a fight: each person says how they feel, each says what they want, then they find a fix together. Stop, think, choose for a child who acts first and thinks later.

Ages 7 to 9

Let everyday life do the work: clubs, sport and group projects, helping neighbours or younger children, and real responsibility with real consequences, like caring for a pet.

Teach directly when needed: "I feel ___ when ___ because ___" for a child who blames or explodes. A few calming options to choose from, such as moving, breathing or taking a break. Talk through what triggers their biggest reactions.

Ages 9 to 12

Let everyday life do the work: more independence, like going to the shop alone or managing their own money, discussions about the news and fairness, and longer projects with setbacks along the way.

Teach directly when needed: handling peer pressure, saying no, healthy and unhealthy friendships, and staying safe and kind online. Breaking big goals into steps for a child who gets overwhelmed.

Getting the balance right

You may be doing too little if:

- Your child has big reactions but no words for them.
- They rarely spend time with other children without an adult in charge.
- Problems are swept away rather than sorted out.
- Mistakes are never owned or repaired, by children or adults.

You may be doing too much if:

- Feelings check-ins have become a ritual, even on calm days.
- Every small upset turns into a long conversation.
- You step in to fix every disagreement or discomfort.
- Everyday words like "anxious" or "trauma" get used for ordinary nerves or bad days.
- Your child can talk about feelings fluently but still can't cope with small setbacks.
- You often remove what your child is worried about, rather than helping them face it in small steps.

A simple rule of thumb: name it briefly, then expect them to cope, with help if they need it. "You're disappointed. That's hard. Let's set it up again." All feelings are okay. Not all behaviour is.

Let small struggles stay small. Step in sooner when it's about safety, bullying, or distress that lasts for weeks.

The adult's part

Children learn most of this by watching the adults around them.

- **Show it.** Name your own feelings now and then, and show how you recover. "I snapped at you. I'm sorry. I should have used my calm voice."
- **Calm first, teach later.** An upset child can't learn. Settle them first, and talk about it once they're calm.
- **Keep routines predictable.** Knowing what's coming lowers stress for everyone.
- **Let natural consequences happen** when it's safe to. A forgotten jumper means a chilly walk.
- **Praise the specific thing.** "You waited your turn without being asked. That was patient."
- **Step back on purpose.** Let them try things on their own: ordering at the café, sorting out a squabble, fixing their own mistake. Help only as much as they need.
- **Look after yourself too.** Stressed, exhausted parents find it harder to stay calm. Your wellbeing is part of your child's.

The homeschool advantage

Homeschooling can bring back the best of 1970s and 80s childhoods, without the smacking and the silence: mixed-age play, real jobs, time for unstructured play, and adults close enough to help but far enough away to let children sort things out. Add a little direct teaching where your child needs it, and you have the middle path.

When to look for more help

If big feelings, friendship troubles or worry keep showing up for six weeks or more and are affecting your child, see the Feelings around learning and Friendships and getting along sections of When Learning Gets Tricky in Homeschool-HQ. They list what to try at home and who can help.

If you're worried about your child's safety or mental health right now, contact your GP, Kids Helpline (1800 55 1800) or Lifeline (13 11 14).

Homeschool-HQ records observations. It does not diagnose. This article is general information for Australian homeschooling families, not medical, psychological or educational advice.

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