



## ***Emotional Safety Mini Guide for Parents***

If you want your children to be...

good students  
respectful  
critical thinkers  
good decision-makers  
kind and thoughtful  
economically successful  
emotionally mature

*\*within their capabilities\**

Then the best gift you can give them is emotional safety. In this guide, we'll talk about what emotional safety is and provide tips for creating safety in your family.

## 1. What Is Emotional Safety?

Many adults did not feel emotionally supported growing up. It's only in recent decades that our society began seeing children as actual people instead of extensions of their adults. For various reasons, the generations that came before ours did not have the knowledge or luxury to even consider that children may have valid experiences and feelings that were different from their own. Do any of these sound familiar?

"I'm cold"

"No you're not"

"I'm hungry"

"You just ate! You can't be!"

"I don't like... I don't want..."

"Do it anyway!"

Expressing your reasons or feelings could and would often get you fussed at for having an attitude or "talking back." In a lot of families, it could get you cursed at, shamed, called names, or talked down to.

Most parents and caregivers I know work hard to give the best to their kids, but they may not recognize ways they are emotionally unsafe or how their own hurts spill over on their children.

This guide is designed to help improve you *and* your child's feelings of emotional safety. Without emotional safety we end up feeling unheard, misunderstood, like we're "the problem," or that we have to earn love. This emotional insecurity is better known as... ANXIETY!

Human babies are born anxious, and this anxiety is relieved each time a caregiver meets our needs. Unfortunately, the needs of kids are often misunderstood or caregivers have their own unmet needs that prevent them from creating an emotionally safe home environment.

Emotional safety means everyone is allowed to feel their own feelings without shame, guilt, or obligation. Emotional safety teaches kids that they are loved and loveable and what matters to them, matters to you.

## 2. Key Areas from the Quiz

• Communication • Boundaries • Consistency • Caregiver Support • Emotional Regulation

If you took the emotional safety quiz, you answered questions from the above-listed domains. Each of these areas connects to your ability to build safety in your home. Let's break them down one by one.

### **Communication:**

What do your words, body language, and nonverbal behaviors tell your child about who they are to you? Three primary communication skills increase emotional safety in your home:

*Clear, concise conversation* - being truthful and open about your own needs reduces confusion in your child. Being honest about what you expect from them and what's going on in their lives makes a BIG difference in how they see the world and navigate it.

*Avoiding blame* - it is very possible that you came from a home where if something went wrong, it was someone's fault. The truth is, things happen and people make mistakes no matter what. Approaching things from a problem-solving perspective, instead of someone being at fault, teaches kids that life has problems and there are people who will help them fix it. It also helps build positive communication skills for future relationships.

*Acknowledging autonomy* - children have their own desires and agendas, and that's how it's supposed to be. Giving them as much control over their lives as possible goes a long way toward teaching them that they matter. We do this by giving choices. Let them choose their clothes, their food, their activities, their MOOD (capitalized because this one is often very hard). Some of us are so conditioned to be acceptable to others that it makes US anxious to allow our kids the power to direct their own lives. But failures and mistakes are part of the path to success, and our children don't have to share our values. Our goal is to raise kids that can successfully navigate their own lives, and we handicap them if we control most of what they do. Autonomy starts as early as 1 or 2 years old and should continuously increase over time.

## **Boundaries:**

A common question many caregivers have is, "How much freedom is too much?" And that's where boundaries come in. Boundaries help us separate our "self" from someone else's "self." Having our own boundaries and supporting our children's boundaries helps maintain our individual identities and encourages respectful behavior.

However, boundaries can be hard to understand if you were taught that your behavior was designed to support other people's comfort and that your value is based on other people's approval. If that's the case, setting boundaries and kids speaking up for themselves probably feels very uncomfortable, especially if you were taught that it was selfish or if you were punished for it.

I teach my clients that boundaries are the fence you build for your own house, not your neighbors. They are not rules or expectations we give others, but guidelines to protect ourselves. As parents and caregivers, we build our own boundaries and hold boundaries for our kids until they can develop their own.

Every person, big and small, has the right to the following boundaries:

- Physical privacy and autonomy
- Emotional privacy and autonomy
- Sensory protection
- Rest and recreation
- Accountability and responsibility

This includes things like - a private space, the right to be upset, the right to have their own things protected, the right to private thoughts, the right to feel their feelings, and the right to make mistakes. It also includes children at all ages, and is not an earned privilege.

Some adults feel that because they have to work and pay bills, they have the right to do whatever they want and override children however, "AN ADULT'S STRESS DOES NOT TRUMP A CHILD'S SAFETY!"

What are some common boundaries that can help keep everyone in the family safe and supported?

"I'm tired right now, we can talk about this later. Let's schedule a time."

"Mommy is overwhelmed, let's do one more hug and that's it for a while."

"I see you're playing the game. Please find a stopping point in the next 30 minutes to do your chores."

"I'm sorry you're sad. How can Daddy help?"

You may be wondering how that last one is a boundary. That's a boundary being set for the child. It says, your feelings are real and important, even if I have other things going on. Teaching your child that their feelings matter and are real, is one of the best boundaries you can set for them. Otherwise, they may begin to believe that their only job is to do what others want them to do.

## Consistency/Caregiver Support:

There is an illustration I heard a long time ago about faith. Everyone puts their faith in someone or something. Every time you sit in a chair, you trust that the chair is going to support you. When payday comes, you expect money to hit your account. The more reliable support we have, the better we feel.

If chairs fell apart every 3rd time you sat in them, how long would it be before you stopped sitting in chairs? If your pay was often late, and occasionally early, but rarely on time, how likely would you be to keep that job?

The thing about being a child though, is that they can't just stop interacting with an unreliable caregiver. Children depend on their parents for their survival. Caregivers have **sooooo** much influence on how their children see the world and how safe they feel. But many parents were stripped of their own power and consistency growing up and now they struggle with understanding anything other than power and control (*see the attached Power/Control wheels for more info*). The parents' own anxieties and struggles keep them from being a trustworthy support.

Children are naturally fearful. They become confident by having a steady, loving presence. When they know that their sadness, worry, anger, disappointment, and joy will be met with a listening ear and loving words, the fears begin to dissolve.

Name-calling, yelling, frequent criticism, and unrealistic expectations are just a few behaviors that can increase a child's anxiety. There was a landmark study that found that across all different demographics in the United States, certain events in childhood made it likely that the child would have difficulty as an adult. From that study came the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) survey, which is also part of this guide. The higher the score, the more likely the child will struggle. Although there are also certain factors that decrease that risk, keep in mind that research shows that we need FIVE positive interactions to counter ONE negative interaction. Ideally, we will support our children as much as possible so they have less to overcome.

Now. Parenting is one of the hardest jobs ever. Children are naturally needy, and raising them tends to expose our deepest inadequacies and fears. Many of us carry the scars and shame from our own childhood, and it bleeds over into our parenting. This guide isn't here to add to the burden, but to give understanding where there may be confusion. If you've taken the time to take the quiz and read this guide, there's a better than good chance that you deeply love your child and want to give them the best. If you've messed up before, messed up terribly, or maybe worse, it's not too late to shift gears and start repairing any damage that may have been done. There are tips in this guide that will help you get started, and you can also reach out directly with questions or concerns.

## **Emotional Regulation:**

Emotional intelligence was found to be one of the highest predictors of adult satisfaction with life. Yet emotions are often overlooked when caregivers think about what their kids need to succeed. Unfortunately, good grades, athletic achievement, and financial gain do not guarantee happiness. The rich, the famous, and the brilliant can all struggle with loneliness, depression, and anxiety. As I was writing this, the suicide of famous comedian Robin Williams came to mind. So many people were shocked that he took his own life. "He has everything!" But all the wealth in the world can't heal a broken heart. Broken feelings often lead to early death, whether through suicide, poor health as you age, risk-taking behaviors, excessive aggression, or emotional death like psychosis or dissociation.

Hopefully, that gets your attention to understand that intact or healed feelings are a priority for EVERYONE, no exceptions.

Feelings and sensations are our first experience with the world. Cold? Scared? Curious? Our caregivers have the ability to give us warmth, hold and comfort us, and explain our world. Experiences of having our needs met in a kind way help us feel our emotions as our own and become signals for things that are happening around us. When a child's external experience matches their internal experience and they have reliable caregivers, they develop what is known as secure attachment. They view the world as safe and supportive, just like their parents. From this position, they are more likely to do well in school, make friends, and make reasonable compromises (See the "Attachment Styles" infographic at the end for more information).

Parents and caregivers have the responsibility of helping children identify their feelings, understand them, and help them deal with them. If they don't know how to do this, often because of their own emotional dysregulation, children will build defenses in order to protect their sense of self. This protection is subconscious but often becomes problematic for the family, at school, and in the community. Children usually hold the feelings in (internalizing) or put them on other people (externalizing).

Common symptoms of emotional dysregulation include:

- Inability to identify their feelings
- Hardly ever cries or cries easily and frequently
- Inappropriate language
- Difficulty understanding others' perspectives
- Yelling
- Cursing or name-calling
- Quickly frustrated
- Unsafe behaviors (putting themselves or others in danger)
- Property destruction
- Trouble making or keeping friends
- Frequent headaches or stomachaches
- Poor decision-making
- Too little or too much sleep

These are some, but not all, of the indications of blocked emotions. Blocked emotions often result in not only emotional and social difficulties, but also physical difficulties and self-medicating or self-harming. Emotions are energy that are designed to flow out of the body, not stay trapped inside. Blocked emotions can be related to a number of factors: the caregiver's own emotional dysregulation, neurodivergence (autism/ADHD/intellectual variance), a significant negative experience or experiences, or external circumstances like work schedules or homelessness.

However, almost all of these are developmentally appropriate at some point. Meaning children have to go through these stages and be taught how to manage them. In order to help them do that, parents need to know about the normal stages of development and not be afraid of or upset by their children's feelings.

When kids yell at us, lie, write on the walls, become defiant, our job is not to take it personally or assume that it's a sign of bad character. Everyone has feelings and the right to express them. Everyone has fears of being hurt or rejected. Children are especially vulnerable because they have to depend on their adults. It is the work of the adult to understand the child and what's going on with them and help them figure out how to deal with it.

First and foremost, then, we have to have or build the capacity to deal with our own feelings and make sure they're not clouded by negative stories about ourselves or our children. Sometimes we allow or give too much out of guilt or anxiety that our child will be unhappy or hate us. Sometimes we give too little or control too much, worried that our children will hurt us or themselves. But we must be relatively balanced (not perfect but able to make well-informed decisions from a place of love instead of fear) to minimize negative impacts.

This doesn't mean you cannot share feelings or set boundaries, but it does mean that the goal is that your feelings are more informative than directive. If your child is frustrating you or driving you crazy, do you need a break? Do you need more support? Is it just a normal development phase that's difficult for you? Do you have space to consider these things? Do you have confidence that you can make good decisions for yourself and your children?

All of these things affect how capable we are of creating an emotionally safe environment, one of the primary goals of parenting. An emotionally safe environment teaches kids that their emotions are real, valid, and meaningful. The journal and tip section of this guide will hopefully better equip you to be more responsive to your child's needs and increase the emotional safety in your home.

### 3. Journal Prompts

1. When was the last time you cried?
2. How do you respond when your child is upset? Are there things that you don't think they should be upset about?
3. How do you handle difficult or hurt feelings?
4. Did you see the adults in your lives express feelings other than happiness or anger growing up?
5. When did you feel emotionally safe as a child? What made that possible?
6. How do you respond when you're emotionally overwhelmed? Do you even notice?
7. Do you have ways to restore your peace when you're upset? What are they?
8. Do your children know their feelings matter to you? How do you know?
9. On a scale of 1-10, how important is it for you to make your child feel emotionally supported? Why?

We'd love to hear your journal insights! Send us an [email](#) or talk about it in our private Facebook [group](#).

### 4. Tips for Building Emotional Safety

Try to incorporate these tips over time. Start with 1 or 2 for a couple of weeks or a couple of months, and then add more once you are consistently using them.

- Notice if you are dismissing your child's feelings or accepting them
- Take breaks when needed, even if it's just a 20-minute shower
- Look at your kids' baby pictures to remind yourself how precious they are
- Write sticky notes with you and your kids' strengths and post them around your house
- Take your kids' concerns seriously, even if they seem silly to you
- Arrange to have 10-15 minutes with each kid, 2-3 times per week
- Listen to feelings first (even your own!) and figure it out second
- Give your kids hugs, kisses, and other affectionate interactions throughout the day
- Apologize if you are unkind
- Model and teach the respectful behavior you want your kids to develop
- Use play and humor to lighten stressful moments
- Whisper instead of yelling
- Create regular weekly routines for predictability
- Find more information about creating emotional safety
- Talk to your kids about what is happening in your lives in a developmentally appropriate way
- If your kid complains about a certain thing multiple times, sit them down to problem-solve
- Outsource! Church, the YMCA, friends and family - find outlets for positive activities and time to vent and unwind

### 5. Your Next Steps

[Sign up](#) for early access to our pre-recorded workshop bundle or to purchase the full workbook when published.

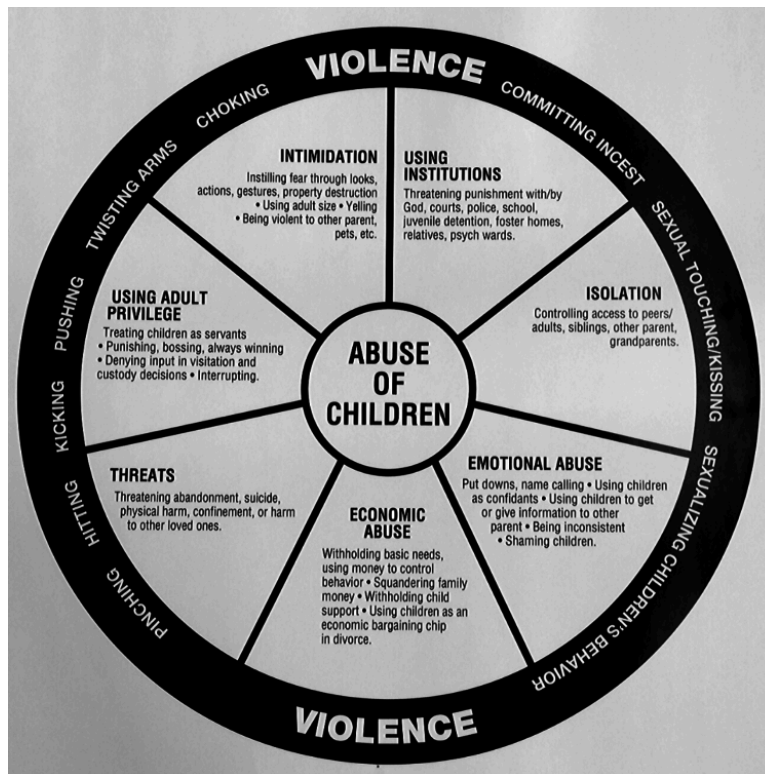


# Control vs Equality Wheels

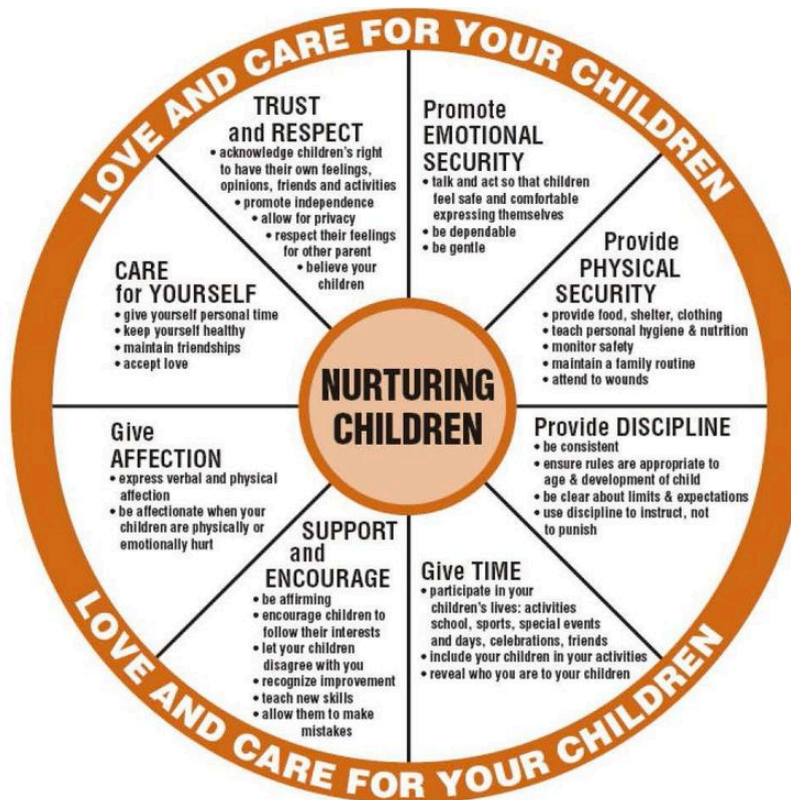
The Power and Control Wheel was originally created to help adults understand domestic violence. There are now several adaptations for different circumstances. This guide includes the original wheel and two about the abuse and nurturing of children.



<https://www.respondinc.org/blog/the-role-of-power-and-control-in-domestic-violence/>



<https://themighty.com/topic/trauma/power-control-wheel-childhood-trauma/>



<https://www.pinterest.com/pin/265782815485425538/>



# Adverse Childhood Experiences Screening

Our relationships and experiences—even those in childhood—can affect our health and well-being. Difficult childhood experiences are very common. Please tell us whether you have had any of the experiences listed below, as they may be affecting your health today or may affect your health in the future. This information will help you and your provider better understand how to work together to support your health and well-being.

**Instructions:** Below is a list of 10 categories of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). From the list below, please place a checkmark next to each ACE category that you experienced prior to your 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. Then, please add up the number of categories of ACEs you experienced and put the *total number* at the bottom.

|  |                          |
|--|--------------------------|
| 1. Did you feel that you didn't have enough to eat, had to wear dirty clothes, or had no one to protect or take care of you? | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. Did you lose a parent through divorce, abandonment, death, or other reason?   | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. Did you live with anyone who was depressed, mentally ill, or attempted suicide?   | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. Did you live with anyone who had a problem with drinking or using drugs, including prescription drugs?                    | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5. Did your parents or adults in your home ever hit, punch, beat, or threaten to harm each other?                            | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6. Did you live with anyone who went to jail or prison?  | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 7. Did a parent or adult in your home ever swear at you, insult you, or put you down?  | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 8. Did a parent or adult in your home ever hit, beat, kick, or physically hurt you in any way?                               | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 9. Did you feel that no one in your family loved you or thought you were special?  | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 10. Did you experience unwanted sexual contact (such as fondling or oral/anal/vaginal intercourse/penetration)?              | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| <b>Your ACE score is the total number of checked responses</b>   |                          |

Do you believe that these experiences have affected your health?

☐

Not Much

☐

Some





☐

A Lot

Experiences in childhood are just one part of a person's life story.  
There are many ways to heal throughout one's life.

# Attachment Styles

The way we see ourselves and connect to others is directly related to our relationships with our primary caregivers. Your primary attachment style is a result of your parent or caregiver's responsiveness to your needs. In the same way, your child's attachment style is a result of how you care for them.

| Childhood Attachment Styles  |   |   |   |
|--|---|---|---|
| <b>SECURE</b>  | <b>ANXIOUS PREOCCUPIED</b>  | <b>DISMISSIVE AVOIDANT</b>  | <b>FEARFUL AVOIDANT/ DISORGANIZED</b>  |
| Secure: Trusts others  | Insecurity  | Insecurity  | Insecurity  |
| Healthy view of self   | High anxiety  | High anxiety  | High anxiety  |
| Speaks wants & needs easily  | Fear of abandonment   | Wants intimacy, but afraid  | Sometimes wants intimacy, other times not.  |
| Can attune to emotions   | Trigger response: fawn, freeze  | Trigger response: Freeze, Flight  | Trigger response: Varies  |
| Interdependent   | Fear of being alone   | Chronic survival mode   | Chronic survival mode   |
| Good self-esteem   | Chronic survival mode   | Doesn't trust easily  | Push, pull dynamic  |
| Not triggered easily   | Preoccupied with relationships  | Builds up walls   | Confused about love   |
| If triggered, can manage emotional response  | Codependency  | Ultra-independent   | Downplays relationships   |
|  |   | Can be dismissive   | Trouble feeling emotions  |
|  | rediscovering   | sacredness  |   |

<https://www.emdrwithali.com/post/attachment-and-how-it-shapes-our-relationships>