



Helping Kids Cope



Claire Locking meets Australian expat and communications specialist JUSTINE CAMPBELL, whose company, ETAL Asia, seeks to empower individuals by cultivating their social skills and emotional intelligence.

Has your child ever come home from school and announced that they are “the worst at football”, “rubbish at maths” or “have no friends”. Absolutely heart-breaking and, like most parents, you probably rush to place the blame on someone else – a loud-mouthed classmate or an uninspiring teacher, perhaps? The harsh reality is that you, the devoted parents, could be partly to blame.

Whether we model ourselves as “Tiger Mums” or prefer a more laidback approach to parenting, in this modern age each and every one of us strives to encourage our children to do their best. We think that helping our child learn their letters before the age of four or encouraging our eight-year-old to get picked for the soccer team is just being a supportive parent. The fact is, our good intentions may actually be piling on more pressure, which for some youngsters can become too much to take.

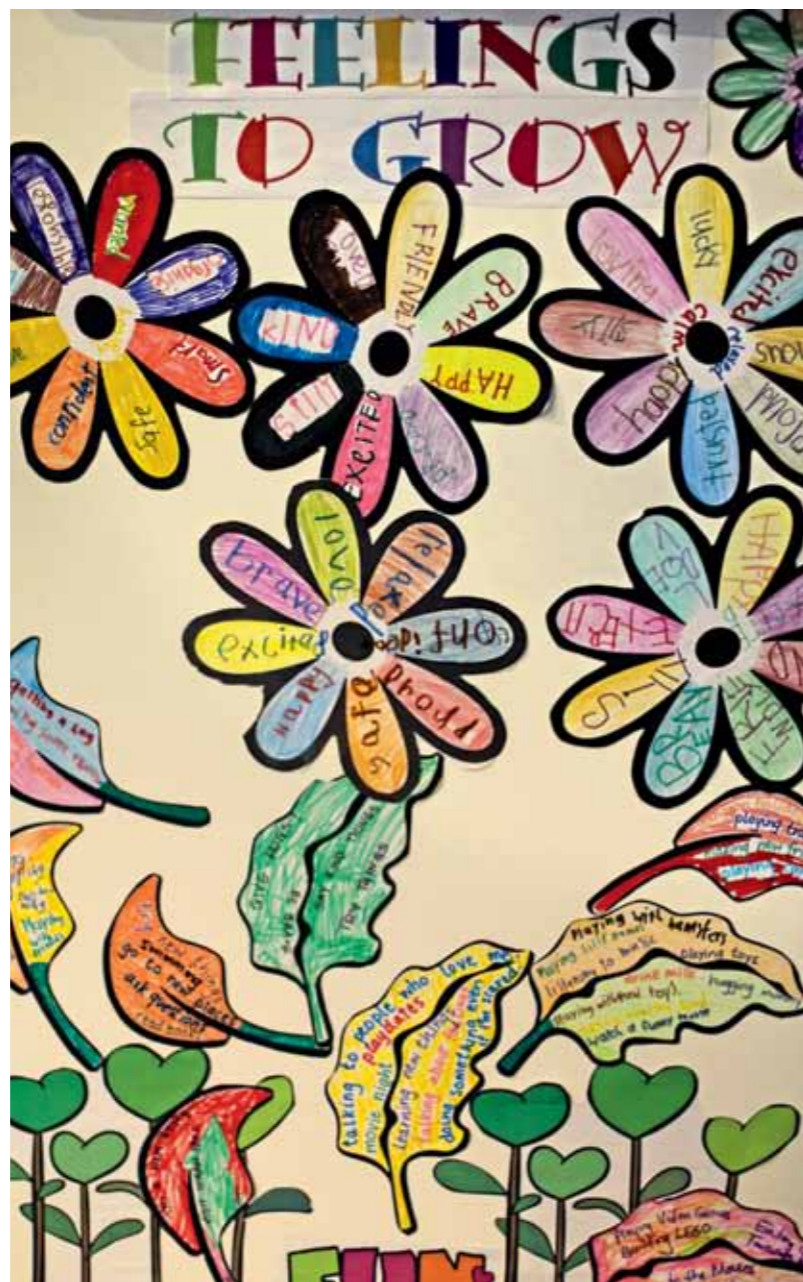
It is an unfortunate but very real fact that stress and anxiety disorders in children are an increasingly common problem in today’s fast-paced, high-tech, activity-packed society. They can experience social anxiety, where they feel they don’t quite measure up to their peers; performance anxiety, where they feel they can’t quite meet their parents’ expectations; or just the stress of overscheduling and being asked to do so many different things to the best of their abilities all in one day.

Typically, children experiencing such excessive worry find it difficult to control the amount of time that they spend worrying, and the worrying can then begin to interfere in their daily life, manifesting in symptoms such as moodiness, over-emotional outbursts, sleep changes, low self-esteem, inability to communicate and make friends, and even a reluctance to go to school.

Australian Justine Campbell is a seasoned expat who has learned from first-hand experience what it is like to see a beloved child struggle with aspects of the fast pace of modern life.

Justine moved to Hong Kong from Calcutta in 2008 with her husband and two young children at a time when she was juggling motherhood with her successful marketing business. After her previous expat postings, Hong Kong seemed a breeze; she was content and excited about building her career and a

“Anyone can become angry – that is easy; but to be angry with the right person at the right time, and for the right purpose and in the right way – that is not within everyone’s power and that is not easy.” – Aristotle



This poster was prepared by a group of four- to six-year-old students in one of ETAL’s EQ (social and emotional intelligence) building programmes as a way of helping students differentiate between feelings that they want to have more of (happiness, excitement and curiosity, for instance) and those feelings that they want to have less of (sadness, fear, concern).



home for her family here. But it was only a short while after arriving in the city that the first round of school interviews for her then four-year-old son was to throw in a curve ball.

“Like all parents here in Hong Kong, there was a pressure for my child to do well at the interview as we needed him to get into the school,” says Justine. “But after just 20 minutes they told me they weren’t sure they could accommodate him, adding that he seemed to have developmental delays. This was the first I had heard of it.”

Difficult news for any parent to hear, but Justine was not willing to just sit back and accept the opinions of others. Instead, she set about tackling the issue with the same meticulous attention to detail and dedication that she seems to apply to every aspect of her life.

“Of course, I blamed myself,” she explains. “But I’m also of the personality that says if you get given lemons, what do you do? You make lemonade. My son was later diagnosed as being gifted but by then I had decided to put the labels aside and focus on what he was actually dealing with. He was having difficulties in social situations,

difficulty attempting new things, and he was having a lot of negative thoughts that were way beyond his four years, so I started to look at how I could help a child who appeared overly anxious.”

Justine took the brave decision to shut down her successful marketing business and do what she could to help her child. She discovered Cognitive Behavioural

Therapy, which examines how your thoughts control your acts, and she travelled to Australia one week a month to train in CBT with a renowned neuropsychologist. “I was like a madwoman and it crippled me financially and emotionally, but at that stage, I would do anything to help my baby,” recalls Justine.

Three years on, Justine’s son is a happy, well-adjusted child and is a pupil in a mainstream school. As for Justine, she has since become a Master in NLP (neurolinguistic programming) and has turned her attention to helping other families struggling with similar issues.

Through her company **ETAL Asia** and partnership with the Blurton Family Development Centre, Justine sees hundreds of families each year who, amid the constant pressure to

“If your emotional abilities aren’t in hand, if you don’t have self-awareness, if you are not able to manage your distressing emotions, if you can’t have empathy and have effective relationships, then no matter how smart you are, you are not going to get very far.”

– Daniel Goleman, Emotional Intelligence



Another poster from an EQ programme, this one by a group of seven- to nine-year-old students who were asked to identify various "body clues" that they felt when they were angry. Justine says, "Recognising body clues for our feelings is the first step in managing intense emotions like anger. All feelings are okay – it's what you do with them that matters."

succeed, have lost the balance in their lives. Many have lost touch with their values and follow the notion that to be accepted they have to be the best at their job, drive the best car, surround themselves with friends, go to the best parties and live life at full throttle. Unfortunately, this constant striving to measure up to others is creating problems maintaining normal family life and is putting pressure on our kids, almost by osmosis.

"If you are here in Hong Kong as an expat, typically you are at the top of your field, which means you are very driven," admits Justine. "Having very high standards for yourself almost always means you have the same high standards for your children. That's where the pressure comes from."

Justine, through her **FRIENDS** programme of fun and interactive workshops, aims to help children deal with the problems of low self-esteem, performance anxiety and social pressure and empower them to deal with the pressures to succeed by giving them invaluable support and coping skills.

She doesn't claim, however, to be a miracle worker, or the "Feelings Doctor" who can fix everything in just a few short weeks. You can't just outsource this aspect of parenting and send your child to her and everything will be fine. Her programme includes heavy parental involvement that sees both children and adults discussing their feelings and confronting some pretty tough stuff.

"I set the parent the following task: name three things you admire in your children, your partner and yourself. You would be amazed at the number of people who struggle to find three things they admire about themselves. I say to them, 'You come to me because you feel your child has a low feeling of self worth, but you have to consider yourself, too.'"

For the children, Justine aims to make it less about the therapy and more about just having fun. Activities and games help the children normalise difficult feelings, making them realise that it's okay to be sad or mad, but it's not okay to wallow in it. Other tasks investigate the feeling of being anxious or angry and which body clues to look out for. Finally, Justine looks at ways to manage these difficult feelings and offers positive coping strategies and how to be resilient in difficult situations. It's almost like learning a new language.

Justine sees huge changes within a matter of weeks with children, who previously were too shy to even speak, interacting happily with children and teachers in class. "One little girl who came in had borderline depression; her parents had tried psychologists and it hadn't worked," recalls Justine. "At the end of my programme she had blossomed into a happy and confident child and was full of pride."

"Parents are doing their best, doing what they think is right," admits Justine. "It's not that they are not being good parents; but, at the end of the day, the best thing a parent can do for their child is to try not to be too perfect."



POSITIVE PARENTING TIPS FOR RESILIENT CHILDREN

- 1 Praise your children for trying, not for being perfect. Try to help your children focus on their efforts in giving things a go.
- 2 Listen. It can be comforting for an adult to share problems so do the same thing for your child.
- 3 Make time for play. All children appreciate a dose of good old-fashioned playtime and being one-on-one with mum or dad.
- 4 Don't dismiss your children's feelings. Set an example at home by verbalising how and why you feel a certain way. Letting your children know it is okay to feel sad or angry will help them make sense of difficult emotions.
- 5 Encourage your children to face difficult situations in a gradual, step-by-step manner. Don't help them avoid difficulties, as this will only promote fear.
- 6 Help your children learn to see life through a positive lens. Children will learn to cope with difficult situations more effectively if they develop the ability to look for the positives in a situation and not focus on the negatives.
- 7 Support positive friendships in your children's lives. Invite their friends over regularly – take them to the park, beach or to the movies together.
- 8 Start every family meal (dinner or breakfast) with each family member sharing a happy moment that they have had during the day or week. Provide lots of praise for sharing these ideas and feelings.
- 9 Ensure that your child is getting enough sleep, has a healthy diet, and is getting regular exercise, preferably outside. Getting physically active may be just what a child needs to lift his or her spirits.
- 10 Provide your family with regular and predictable routines and rituals. Stick to the same meal times, bed times, homework times and try to allow some downtime and relaxation every day.
- 11 Try to be consistent with schedules, rules and expectations in your parenting.
- 12 Avoid overscheduling. Too many activities can lead to stress and anxiety and just as grownups need some downtime, so do kids.
- 13 Be aware of how changes can affect your child. Even something as simple as moving to the next year at school can be a transition that a child needs help to cope with.
- 14 Set a calm example. Handle your own stress calmly and it is less likely that anxiety in children will be a problem in your household.
- 15 Remember, most importantly, to look after yourself as a parent; if you are happy and positive, your children will greatly benefit from your example.

For more information on the FRIENDS programme and Justine's other services, visit www.etaglobal.com or call 3552 3012.

Justine will be a key facilitator at the EdVenture Summer Camp at Niseko, Japan, in July this year. Designed with Hong Kong families in mind, the camp

will allow families to enjoy the nature and environment of Niseko at the same time as participating in a varied programme of activities from rafting and arts and crafts to social and emotional intelligence workshops. Visit www.edventureglobal.com for more information about the camp. 📱