

## “Emotional Intelligence Comes of Age” with Marc Brackett

### Transcript of Cerebrum Podcast



**Guest: Marc Brackett**, Ph.D., is founding director of the [Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence](#) and professor in the Child Study Center, Yale School of Medicine. Brackett is the lead developer of [RULER](#), a systemic, evidence-based approach to social and emotional learning that has been adopted by over 2,000 public, charter, and private pre-school through high schools across the U.S. and in other countries. He is co-founder of [Oji Life Lab](#), a corporate learning firm that develops innovative digital learning systems for emotional intelligence. With Facebook, Brackett has developed social resolution tools to help adults and youth resolve online conflict; a bullying prevention hub to support educators, families, and teens; and [InspirED](#), a center to support high school students in leading positive change in their schools. He’s also on the board of directors of CASEL and the author of the new book, [Permission to Feel: Unlocking the Power of Emotions to Help Our Kids, Ourselves, and Our Society Thrive](#).

**Host: Bill Glovin** serves as editor of *Cerebrum* and as executive editor of the Dana Foundation. He was formerly senior editor of *Rutgers Magazine*, managing editor of *New Jersey Success*, editor of *New Jersey Business* magazine, and a staff writer at *The Record* newspaper in Hackensack, NJ. Glovin has won 20 writing awards from the Society of Professional Journalists of New Jersey and the Council for Advancement and Support of Education. He has a B.A. in Journalism from George Washington University.

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[Intro] Marc Brackett: Well, I think this is the century of emotional intelligence, because I think for far too long, we have focused on cold cognition. I don’t know about you, but I never learned strategies as a kid other than yelling and screaming and crying. So it has to be taught, and I think that’s what makes it unique. It’s when the sand gets kicked in your face; that’s when you need these skills. And I think the coronavirus is that sand in our face.

Bill Glovin: That's just a small sample from Marc Brackett, an expert in something called emotional intelligence and our guest on this episode of the Cerebrum podcast. Hi, I'm Bill Glovin Executive Editor of *Cerebrum* magazine, and our goal on our podcast is to dig a little deeper into our articles and maybe get a little more personal with our authors.

Marc is the co-author of “Emotional Intelligence Comes of Age,” which he co-wrote with colleague Christina Cipriano. You can find their article at [Dana.org](#). Marc is founding director of the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence and professor in the Child Study Center at the Yale School of Medicine. In this podcast he explains why his center is the only center in the country of its kind. He also tells us about his path to the field and how becoming a fifth-degree black belt in Aikido and his own experience with therapy has informed his work.

Marc has also developed something called Ruler, which has been adopted by over 2000 schools in the U.S. And around the world. With Facebook, he has developed social tools to help both kids and adults resolve online conflict. And you might want to check out his new book, *Commissioned to Feel: Unlocking the power of emotions to help our kids, ourselves, and our society thrive*. That's a mouthful.

Welcome to the *Cerebrum* podcast, Marc, and thanks for the wonderful article. How are you coping in the days of Covid-19?

Marc Brackett: Yeah, well, I always joke that I'm the one who's supposed to ask people how they're feeling. And I don't want to be asked myself. Today is a good day, the sun is out and I just finished a huge training for district superintendents. I'm feeling relieved, but in the background I'm still feeling a lot of anxiety and stress around what's happening in the world around us.

Bill Glovin: Let's start with how you got interested in emotional intelligence as an academic discipline.

Marc Brackett: You know, interestingly, I got involved in this work very young, like as a teenager, because I was a kid who hated school and struggled a lot, and wasn't a good student. And I had a lot of bullying problems as a kid. And I was blessed to have an uncle who happened to be writing a curriculum about feelings. He used me as his Guinea pig. Fast forward in college, not sure exactly what I'm going to do. Graduate from college, start reading books on motivation and emotion and come across research on emotional intelligence, and its beginnings. And I called the two guys who were the first theorists and I had interviews with them. And then all of a sudden, I got my doctorate and you know, it's been around 25 years ago already.

Bill Glovin: Wow. Some people might think of EI, or emotional intelligence, as just plain common sense. Is it?

Marc Brackett: It's not. As a matter of fact, oftentimes our gut feelings or gut instincts are not really accurate, they're based on misinformation. So, we think of emotional intelligence as a set of real skill that have to be learned and developed and refined over the course of your life.

Bill Glovin: What are the stages? Do you not get naturally better at EI with age and as you gain more maturity and experience?

Marc Brackett: It shows in research that typically as we develop, we become more experienced in the world around dealing with feelings, but it doesn't necessarily guarantee you're going to become expert because you have to really learn it. So for example, we have what we call ruler skills, which are the five skills of emotional intelligence, recognizing emotions, perceiving emotions in people's facial

expressions, body language, vocal tone, being aware of your own feelings. You have to have a vocabulary to do that well. And we make a lot of mistakes when we read other people's feelings.

So, it takes practice and understanding emotions, like where do our feelings come from? Like, why am I angry versus disappointed? And most people don't know the difference between that, as a matter of fact. I've asked millions of people, "What's the difference between anger and disappointment?" And everybody's like "one's stronger than the other," "one is more outer and inner," but really, it's about injustice versus unmet expectations. That means we have to learn how to label our feelings and get that vocabulary. The final two skills are what we call the skills that help you kind of deal with your emotional life. So expressing emotions, knowing how and when to express your emotions with different people and context. And then finally the big one is the regulation of emotion, the strategies that we use to deal with life's ups and downs and achieve our goals.

**Bill Glovin:** Do you find that some people have certain innate aspects of emotional intelligence, but it's really lacking in others?

**Marc Brackett:** It depends, so the skills are not all equally weighted in terms of their biological roots. We know, for example, that emotion perception skills are very much linked to an area of our brain that's associated with the processing of facial expressions. Whereas emotion regulation, for example, emotional vocabulary, none of us is born with a little area of our brain that has all these words, right? We've got to learn them. And then emotion regulation, I don't know about you, but I never learned strategies as a kid other than yelling and screaming and crying. So, it has to be taught. And I think that's what makes it unique.

**Bill Glovin:** There are stages and someone could maybe achieve a different level of emotional intelligence earlier than someone else, or ...?

**Marc Brackett:** Definitely, because it's the exposure you have, right? It's just like, I always make the parallel to the martial arts. That was my other career. And I have a fifth-degree black belt in this [Japanese] martial art called Aikido. And it was very clear when I entered into my martial art, I was not very coordinated, didn't have a lot of strength, and it took me a while to get my yellow belt. And I learned how to do the kicks and the punches for the yellow belt and the blue belt and the red belt. And then I can do the spinning jumping kick. And then I could flip people in all these different directions. And it was a gradual development of my muscles, of my memory, of my knowledge skills. The same thing applies to emotional intelligence.

You're not going to teach a four-year old, the words like alienation and despondency, right? You're going to teach them happy, sad, anger, fear, surprise, and you can build their emotional vocabulary because the emotion system develops in tandem with the cognitive and social system. And same

thing applies to regulation, right? You can't teach a four-year-old or a five-year-old how to engage in complex cognitive reappraisal, which is a strategy to regulate emotions. But you can teach that to a 7-, 10-, 15-year-old.

- Bill Glovin: To use the same analogy that might apply to the fact that let's say you are certain body weight and had a certain amount of natural flexibility when you went into your [Japanese] martial arts discipline. You could perhaps do that better than someone who might be overweight, who has not quite as athletic. So, using that analogy, somebody who grows up in a household with very sensible parents who are very nurturing, who give them the attention that is so important in development. I would think that would play a role, would it not?
- Marc Brackett: A 100 percent because, you know, we learn these skills through the modeling of them. And so, if you grew up in a family where your parents are alcoholics and yelling at each other all the time and punishing you and not asking you how you're feeling, your skills are going to be sacrificed. Whereas if you're born in a family where you have parents who are, when you're watching television shows saying look at the character's facial expressions, how do you think they're feeling? Or parents are sharing how they're feeling, are asking the questions about feelings, and helping kids differentiate between feelings of anger and disappointment as I've said. Of course, that's going to shape emotional development and emotional intelligence skill development.
- Bill Glovin: In your role consulting in corporate learning, on working with businesses. How do you measure someone's emotional intelligence and does imaging play a part?
- Marc Brackett: We don't do imaging in our work on emotional intelligence in terms of its measurement. Although I've published one study with a colleague that shows the association between certain brain area activity and the use of the skills that are involved in social information processing. So there's data to show different areas of our brain are activated when we're using these skills. But mostly what people want to know is, am I pretty good? Am I great at reading people? And what's my emotional vocabulary like compared to others? How am I at regulating emotions? Do I have a tool bag of effective strategies?
- Bill Glovin: So, there are actual tools that you apply?
- Marc Brackett: Mm-hmm (affirmative).
- Bill Glovin: And these tools, are they different if you're measuring somebody who's an elementary school student versus a teenager versus a college student versus a corporate executive? Different tools for different age groups and such.
- Marc Brackett: We haven't gotten there yet. Right now, we have some stuff for kids and an adult battery. It's always easier for this kind of stuff to work with adults, just because development, right, is really complicated with these kinds of

assessments and because of the way the brain develops from a 5-year-old to 10-year-old, to a 15-year-old, a 20-year-old. It's very time consuming to build a norm assessment for children, but we're trying it. We have the funding to do it. It just takes forever.

Bill Glovin: How does someone improve?

Marc Brackett: So I think there's a few things around this. In my book, which is, as you said, *Permission to Feel*, I first say you have to be motivated to do this work. So what I call people who are motivated are, people who strive to be emotion scientists versus emotion judges. That's the attitudinal piece of the work, meaning that you have to have a mindset that I can learn this, and it's interesting, and important, and it's going to help me be healthier and happier. Versus the emotion judge who is like, "Feelings are ridiculous. Get away from me. I don't care how you're feeling. I'm never going to share with you how I'm feeling."

And once you adopt that mindset, then you have to go on this journey of curiosity and skill-building. And I mean, it's the reason why I wrote a book, to teach people the skills, but also their interventions. And by way of example, our center has an intervention called Ruler, which has now, as you said, a couple of thousand schools and growing. And our goal for ruler is to really provide tools. Like we have a tool called the Mood Meter. So you practice on a daily basis, plotting your emotions and asking yourself questions about why and learning strategies. So we teach explicit emotion regulation, whether it be breathing exercises, whether it be engaging in positive self-talk, whether it be understanding how to communicate and get social support. And the hypothesis is that by learning from practicing and refining, you're developing the skill.

Bill Glovin: Does culture or socioeconomic status come into play?

Marc Brackett: Socioeconomic status really should not be a factor in learning these skills other than exposure. And culture does play an important role because while the skills are mostly universal, right? Certain countries have more or less words for certain concepts. And then the rules, for example, for expressing emotions are different across different cultures. By way of example, eye contact, Korea [sic] where my martial art is from, right, eye contact with your martial arts instructor and the way you talk to the elderly is very different than if I'm going into a business meeting on Wall Street. So what we argue in our work is that you have to be the emotion scientist, right? Who is going into these different cultures and be in learner mode as opposed to knower mode. And that's kind of a part of emotional intelligence.

Bill Glovin: Somebody is going through therapy, let's say, would they do better with emotional intelligence since they're already on sort of a path for kind of self-improvement or self-insight?

Marc Brackett: You know, my vision is that therapists are all trained in emotional intelligence so they can use these skills to support the mental health of their clients and patients. The truth is when I was a kid and I went to therapy, I went to a more psychodynamic therapy as a kid and as an adult, too. And I did a lot of talking and had a lot of catharses around my relationship with my mother, but I didn't learn any skills. Now with CBT and DBT, the more skill-based therapies, the incorporation of the components of emotional intelligence are much more prevalent.

Bill Glovin: What I gathered from your article was that emotional intelligence is still a relatively new field. And you said you've been in it for 25 years. How has it evolved over that time?

Marc Brackett: Yeah, I mean, it's very new. Think of general intelligence, got formulated back around 1900 or so, that has 120-year history. Emotional intelligence, its first definition was 1990 by Peter Salovey and Jack Mayer. So we're talking 30 years. So there's still a lot of science to be done to unpack the granularity of these skills, and how they're measured, and how they develop, and context, and the biology of them. I would say that what's happened mostly in my 20-something years of research and practice is we've come to a greater conclusion, especially here in the United States of the value and importance of the skills. That we're starting to give emotional intelligence, a seat at the table with other forms of intelligence. And that's what it's going to take to do the research and to disseminate the practices.

Bill Glovin: Are there lots of other centers like yours in academic institutions that study this or are you unique?

Marc Brackett: Yale has a history of this work because Peter Salovey, our President, was one of the founders of the theory of emotional intelligence. So it's rooted here at our university. There are many, many researchers studying different aspects of emotional intelligence, like emotion regulation or their perception of emotion in faces and bodies and voices. But in terms of it as an overarching construct we're the only group that I know of.

Bill Glovin: And do you feel it can evolve from where you are to other places or it is evolving or it's on the rise? You pointed out that a lot of therapists aren't trained in it or don't maybe consider it as much as they could to be more effective. So are there ways to, I guess, market it?

Marc Brackett: There are. In education spaces, I'm part of an organization called CASEL, the Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional learning, where we're trying to really push out the policies, the practices, and the research in this space to get it more widespread. We do work in other countries, so we're opening a division of our center in Beijing, China, we have a small group in Italy, a small group in Spain, a small group in Australia. So that's exciting work.

I think this is the century of emotional intelligence because I think for far too long, we have focused on cold cognition, people's logical, cold reasoning abilities. And what's very clear is that the workforce, the current one, they want people obviously, it's always better to have IQ, right? Can't complain, right? Smart is good. But if you don't have the emotional intelligence capacities, the ability to deal with conflict, the ability to inspire, the ability to handle feedback, build and maintain positive relationships and things of that sort, the social and emotional side of things, it's really hard. And people's success is in part dependent upon the development of emotional intelligence.

Bill Glovin: So I was going to ask you, can you be successful without EI? And I think you just kind of answered that. Yeah, I guess you can, but it's going to be a lot harder.

Marc Brackett: Yes. I mean without getting into looking at our current nation right now, there are a lot of people who have made it to very high-level positions with no emotional intelligence. It's not the determination or that you have a single determinant of your success. And it obviously depends on how you define success. Is it making a lot of money? There are a lot of unemotionally intelligent people who are rich. Is it about having wellbeing and a sense of purpose in life? Oh, now we're getting somewhere. Is it about having good relationships? That's an interesting thing.

I always say that the bully can be successful, they just die very lonely. And so the emotional intelligence piece helps with things like your creativity. It helps with the persistence that you have to have when you're pursuing a career path or a project. It helps when you deal with obstacles or harsh feedback. That's where the emotional intelligence piece is really important.

Bill Glovin: So, it sounds like it has a direct link to happiness and quality of life.

Marc Brackett: Correct. And there's research to support that for sure.

Bill Glovin: With the pandemic that we're experiencing. Is there emotional intelligence issues that go along with that?

Marc Brackett: Completely. I can tell you that I'm testing all of my emotional intelligence skills right now being cooped up at home. I think this is an example. One of the things that we say in our research and in our trainings is that when life is really great, there's no one challenging you, you're on vacation, you're drinking your pina colada, it doesn't really matter if you have emotional intelligence. It's when the sand gets kicked in your face. That's when you need these skills. And I think the coronavirus is that sand in our face and who knew we would be wearing masks and social distancing and have all this anxiety. And so to me, this is the ultimate test of our emotional intelligence. Can we use these skills wisely to get through these really challenging times?

- Bill Glovin: Well, I think that's a great place to end and I really thank you for your article which readers can find at Dana.org. It's called again, Emotional Intelligence Comes of Age. And our guest has been Marc Brackett, who is the founding director of the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence. Thank you again, Marc. And I wish you the best of luck and that you get through this coronavirus and that all your neuroses disappear at some point.
- Marc Brackett: Well, they may not disappear, but I'll learn how to manage them effectively. How's that? All right. You're very welcome.
- Bill Glovin: And that's our Cerebrum podcast. We hope you enjoyed it. You can find all our other podcasts, our magazine, and Dana foundation content at [Dana.org](https://Dana.org). Thanks for listening and have a wonderful day.