



**Quest for Life**  
FOUNDATION

**Building Resilience and  
Emotional Intelligence  
In Ourselves and Our Children**  
Petrea King

# Quest for Life Foundation Philosophy

**The Quest for Life Foundation provides practical skills and strategies for individuals, communities and organisations in crisis to heal and grow through their challenges.**

The Quest for Life Foundation was established in 1989 by Petrea to further her work. Since her unexpected recovery from leukaemia in 1984, Petrea has devoted her life to counselling, facilitating groups and retreats, training health professionals and lecturing widely on health and healing. Up until 1995 the Quest for Life Foundation was based in Crows Nest, Sydney. In June 1995, Petrea and the work of Quest for Life moved to Bundanoon in the beautiful Southern Highlands of NSW.

In 1998, generous benefactors made it possible for the Quest for Life Foundation to purchase a beautiful guest house which was built in 1898. The bricks for the main building were made and fired on the property. After undergoing major refurbishments the Centre opened in May 1999. The Centre, set in eight and a half tree-filled acres, provides an oasis for time-out and an ideal environment for reflection, healing and the learning of new and valuable life skills.

In June 2014, the leadership team from Blackmores Ltd completely renovated and refurnished the main room at Quest. We are deeply grateful for the sponsorship of Blackmores Ltd and the many ways in which they demonstrate their support of our work.

The Quest for Life Foundation provides a range of residential retreats, workshops, resources and services that encourage, empower and educate people living with cancer, chronic pain or illness or who are suffering from grief, stress, depression, anxiety, PTSD or trauma, as well as for those who care for them.

Fundraising by Quest, donations and bequests allow us to keep the cost of our retreats as low as possible so that everyone in need of our programs can attend.

Your support of the Foundation is greatly appreciated as there are many more services planned for the future. Please sign up for our monthly e-newsletter so that we can keep you abreast of our plans! We would love for you to feel part of the Quest for Life Community.

“Transformation is not about changing the person.  
It is a change in perspective and  
a profound shift in our experience of consciousness”.  
Petrea King



# Building Resilience and Emotional Intelligence In Ourselves and Our Children

The greatest gift you can give yourself, your children, your family and your community is the gift of your own good physical, mental, emotional and spiritual wellbeing. By being a living demonstration of how to care for these various aspects of yourself, you teach your children how to do the same for themselves. Children model themselves on what they see and experience around them. They are far more influenced by what they see and feel than what you might be telling them. In an ideal world, our values underpin our behaviours. It follows then, that our words and actions are congruent with the values we want to instil in our children.

None of us are perfect parents! We are all doing our best, given who we are, what happened to us as we grew up, our life experiences, and what we made of that upbringing and those experiences. We can all be a 'work in progress' as we grow and mature into greater wisdom, compassion, insight, understanding and creativity. If we are willing to share our own vulnerabilities with our children, we teach them that it is ok not to be perfect but it is always important to live according to our values.

## Reality is dictated by our perspective

Young children have a wonderful open-minded curiosity about everything. They have a natural ability and inclination to learn and to explore. As teachers and parents we can foster and encourage this open enquiring awareness, by being aware of when we are imposing our own perspective or judgements.

Reality is, in large part, shaped by how we view it. The way we see the world is through the filters of our past experiences and the beliefs and decisions we've made because of them. We see the world and our relationships through these filters. Some of these judgements or filters are held by an individual and some are shared by a whole culture or community.

These filters and judgements influence how we feel about ourselves, our aspirations or goals, what we want to do, or have, in our lives, our motivations, our values, the way we conduct our relationships, whether we speak up or remain silent, become outgoing or inward looking – indeed, these filters or judgements influence every aspect of our lives and the quality of life we experience.

Perspectives that differ from each other are rife in our communities and especially in the media. People or cultures that maintain an inflexible perspective make for a deadlock that ensures no creative solutions can be developed, let alone implemented.

As parents, we need to be aware of the filters and judgements we have acquired and, at the same time, those we are instilling in our children. If we are more aware of the biases of our own perspectives – the self-imposed blinkers which stop us from seeing things clearly – it helps us to see and respect the differing perspectives of other people.

If we encourage self-awareness and curiosity in ourselves and the children within our influence, then we – and they – learn to appreciate and understand differing ways of thinking, knowing and seeing the world and our relationships within the world. The ability to see multiple perspectives allows for diversity and ensures less conflict and animosity in our interactions. Through an open-minded curiosity about other people's perspectives, we arrive at more creative, informed and innovative solutions. When solutions are born out of shared perspectives, collaboration is more likely and solutions are more effective because they belong to the collective rather than from one person's ideas of how things 'should' be.

We need to remain flexible in our own view of things and encourage the same in our children. From their earliest years, children are developing interpersonal relationships through negotiation and by engaging with others. Even very young children are discovering effective – and non-effective – solutions to problems. They do this both for themselves and with others, which leads them to finding effective ways of being in relationships and builds social responsibility. The ability to see another person’s perspective also cultivates empathy and understanding and, ultimately, respect and compassion for others even when they hold very different views or values to our own.

Schooling is usually focused on the obvious – learning information like reading, writing, maths, history and science. However, there is another area of learning, which is largely unconscious but has a huge influence on how a child develops into an adult. It includes the attitudes, judgements, values and preferences that a child develops by observation and through their own understanding of relationships and experiences. This learning is perhaps even more important than the facts and figures, as it will dictate a child’s openness to learning and their overall stance or view of their life experiences.

If a child is encouraged to develop their awareness of these attitudes, judgements, beliefs and so on, they become empowered to choose how they want to be in the world and are able to author their own story, rather than adopt habitual patterns that may impede their happiness and fulfilment. The training of children to have positive social interactions builds a sense of shared responsibility for collaborative outcomes and brings harmony within the child which flows into their relationships – and so into the world.



The following practices, ideas and tools can help (ourselves!), children and young people develop greater self-awareness, improved emotional literacy and increased empathy and understanding. Choose the ones that appeal to you and your children and cultivate an open-minded exploration to see if they have a positive impact on your family, school, community and sporting relationships.

### 1. Take a Moment: Take a Breath

When we hold a fixed view about something and are adamant about getting our way or forcing our view on others, or if we feel fearful or nervous, we tend to tense up and our breathing becomes more shallow and rapid. The sympathetic nervous system is activated, the heart rate increases, it secretes peptides which interfere with kidney function and the blood pressure rises. This is our fight/flight mechanism. It's a very useful system when we are escaping from an angry bear but less useful in our relationships when people may say or do things that cause us to react. In order to respond, rather than react, we need to settle or calm ourselves.

There is a third 'f' to the fight/flight system in our bodies that children may develop if they grow up in a home where there is violence, abuse or other behaviours that cause children to be distressed. The third 'f' is for 'freeze'. Because children are inexperienced and the answer to high stress is neither to run (where to?) or fight (fight what?), they freeze. If this happens regularly in childhood, the child may well develop into an adult who doesn't know what to do when challenged or, if they are in stressful situations, because their fall-back position is to go quiet, to not participate, to internalise their feelings, to freeze.

When children get upset or anxious, encourage them to take three long, slow, deep breaths. By practicing this when a child is already calm or perhaps when getting ready for sleep, it becomes easier to remember at other times when challenges arise. It is difficult to maintain anxiety and upset, if we're able to fully stop and breathe deeply. Practice by lying on the floor with your child; ask them to close their eyes and place their hand on their belly. Tell the child to focus on their hand rising and falling with the breath.

When a child becomes anxious, fearful, angry or upset, help them to nip the feeling in the bud by putting their hand on their belly and focus on their hand rising and falling with each deep breath. Children find it a great relief to know that they can self soothe and master their feelings by consciously focusing on the breath. Deep breathing provides a space, a moment to stop and this, in turn, activates the parasympathetic nervous system which allows the body and mind to return to a more comfortable resting state.

The sympathetic nervous system activates the fight/flight/freeze state of physiology – blood flows to our muscles for strenuous activity, the heart rate and breathing increases to oxygenate our blood for activity, our digestion switches off, our immune system is suppressed and so on. The parasympathetic nervous system allows the body to rest and digest, to relax and sleep. Taking three deep breaths when under stress allows us to take a moment to reflect, to be aware of our feelings and to make wiser choices that may lead to solutions.



## 2. Moving from Reaction to Response

Reaction and response are often used in our conversations or in the media as if they mean the same thing. They are two very different words and you may find it valuable to use them appropriately from now on and to teach your children the difference between the two.

A reaction is a re-activation of a past physiology or behaviour that we practice again in the present moment.

A response generally takes us into new and more creative territory.

We don't say, "Take re-actability for your life". We say, "Take responsibility for your life". That is, our ability to respond to the moment as it is.

When we react, we feel like a victim of our circumstance. When we respond we bring the whole of ourselves – our wisdom, insight, creativity, intuition, perspective – to the challenge we are dealing with.

A reaction is always felt in the body. Get to know your own body and what it does when you are reacting and help your children to know where they feel their reactions in their body. This is a hugely important step in learning to respond to life's challenges, rather than reacting to them. People often describe the following sensations when they are reacting to someone or something that has been said, read or done:

- Our tummy feels like it is squirming
- Our heartrate increases
- Our breathing becomes more shallow
- Our jaw tenses or we clench our teeth
- We tense our shoulders or neck
- Our head can feel like it will burst or that there's a tight band around it
- Our thinking becomes chaotic
- Our palms become sweaty
- We find our hands tensing into fists
- We feel shaky in our legs

Taking those three long, slow, deep breaths can give us a moment to move from a reaction to a more appropriate response. If we keep reacting to situations in our lives, then we are destined to keep repeating what we've done in the past. If we always do what we've always done, then we'll always get what we've always had in the past.



### 3. The Language of Reaction and Response

When we are caught up in a reaction there are certain words we habitually use. These are perfectly fine words to have in our vocabulary but we need to be aware of when we are using them otherwise we may find ourselves feeling, speaking and acting like a victim.

When we are habitually reacting to a circumstance we often say the following words:

- I can't...
- I should...
- Try...
- But...
- If only...
- Never...
- Always...
- Impossible...

When we say, "I can't speak in public", "I can't have that conversation with my mother", "I can't stop eating sugar", we are affirming that a habit or a fear is in control of us rather than feeling empowered to make new choices, go in new directions or choose healthier options.

For instance, instead of saying, "I can't speak in public", we could choose more empowered language by saying, "I choose (or choose not) to speak in public". Or, "I have decided to (or not to) have that conversation with my mother". Or, "I am... reducing my sugar intake/increasing my exercise/practicing responding rather than reacting..." Rather than "I can't stop eating sugar, I can't exercise, I can't help reacting".

"I should..." is generally the echo of our own parents or someone outside of our family who gave us an agenda that may not reflect our own choice or values. Again, we can use a much more empowered language by saying, "I have decided to (or decided not to)", "I will (I won't)" rather than, "I should/I ought to/I have to".

People often say they will 'try' and 'be there/do that'. When people say, "I'll try and come on Saturday", you can be pretty sure they're NOT coming! We need to consciously use our time and when we commit to attending something, or attending *to* something, we can use a more committed language. "I will be there on Saturday", "I have decided to not attend this event", rather than, "I'll try" when we don't really have an intention. "I will reduce my sugar intake" is different from "I'll try to reduce my sugar intake".

I imagine you've had a conversation with someone who says, "I agree with what you're saying but..." and then they list all the reasons that they actually disagree with what you have said. Instead of using 'but' in this way, use 'and' instead. "I hear what you are saying and I am wondering how that might affect or impact on..."

"If only" can drive us nuts! "If only she had left five minutes earlier/later". "If only I had never taken up smoking". "If only I hadn't said/done that". It's a painful and difficult mechanism that keeps us trapped in the past and in regret.

We often use, 'never' and 'always' when we are loading issues from the past into the present issue. "You always walk out of the room when I talk to you about...". "You never listen to me when I want to explain...". Deal with the present time issue and don't load into the present issue or conflict all the angst and resentment of the past.

If you believe something is 'impossible', you're probably right! Saying something is 'impossible' stifles creativity and 'possibility thinking'.

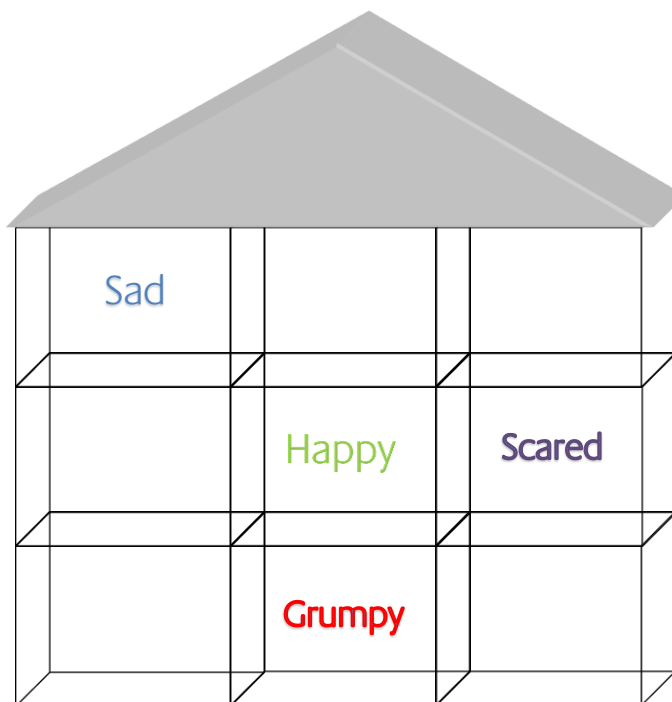
By using our language appropriately, we are teaching our children to do the same. We can either weed these words out of our vocabulary altogether or only use them appropriately.

#### 4. We are Not our Feelings: We Have Feelings

Instead of labelling ourselves as our feelings, we can change our language to more appropriately reflect the relationship that we have with our feelings. There's a very big difference between saying, "I am angry" and "I feel angry". We may have much less choice in how we behave, if we believe that we ARE the feeling that we are having!

Children, from around three years of age, will take to the Mansion of Emotion very easily and it can make a profound and positive difference in how they deal with their feelings for the rest of their lives.

Use a whiteboard, the fridge door and a whiteboard marker or a piece of paper to draw up a house divided into at least nine 'rooms'. You can tell a child that inside their head and body there is a mansion of emotion. There are as many rooms in the mansion as they have feelings. There is a fear room, a happy room, a tired room, a sad room, a grumpy room, a regret room or whatever feelings your child can relate to. You can write the name of the feeling, one into each of the rectangles, in the mansion of emotion.



For very young children you might want to cut out and laminate faces of animals that express a wide range of feelings. You can ask a young child which animal looks like how they feel. For instance, if a child picks a picture of a lion snarling, then you could stick the picture on the rectangle named 'grumpy'. This teaches young children some emotional literacy. They gradually learn to name the feelings that they are having.

You can also ask a child where they are feeling the feeling in their body. They may tell you that their head feels like it's going to burst, their tummy feels sick, their chest or shoulders feel tight, their hands become fists or wherever it is they might be feeling the feeling in their body.

You can also ask a child how strongly they are feeling that feeling on a scale of 0 – 10. "So you're feeling grumpy and you can feel that your tummy feels sick, your head feels like it's going to burst, your chest feels tight. On a scale of 0 – 10, how grumpy are you feeling?" Most adults and children can tell you exactly how strong the feeling is for them.

If it's a 3 on the 'grumpy scale' then the child can learn how to self-manage themselves by perhaps doing some deep breathing. If they feel that they are a 10 on the grumpy scale, then perhaps going for a run to the back fence or a tree – five times! – may help discharge the energy or kicking a cardboard box around the backyard might help them to let off steam in a way that doesn't hurt anyone or anything – except the box!



It is useful to have an agreement with your children that it is never ok to damage themselves, things or other people. It is ok to express their feelings in ways that don't wound themselves, others or property.

Helping children to understand that it is ok to feel ANY feeling – because they pass – and that it is important not to hurt themselves, other people or furniture, possessions or things because of how they feel, can help a child to lose their fear of having strong feelings. We can feel any feeling; it is what we DO with our feelings that matters.

## 5. Coming to Our Senses

It is commonly said to people who are having a panic attack or feeling highly anxious, “come to your senses!” We say this because we all know that our bodies are in the present moment. Our minds, on the other hand, are all over the place, projecting our fears, anxieties, worries and fretting into the future or we're preoccupied with regrets, blaming, shaming, resenting, rehashing upsets from the past. One of the most effective ways of bringing the mind to rest is to bring our awareness to the senses of the body. We can practice this constantly throughout the day and teach it to the children in our sphere of influence.

You are not your brain; you have a brain. An unmanaged brain can be a nightmare over which we have little control. 95% of the time we are acting from our unconscious mind and 5% of the time we are making conscious choices and decisions or using our creativity. We need to reverse this so that every moment becomes a conscious moment, every choice a conscious choice, every conversation a conscious conversation, every decision a conscious decision and every encounter becomes a conscious encounter. Then we live a life full of conscious awareness.

This takes practice but is essential if we are to wake up to how precious life is, what treasures our relationships are, and so that we consciously live a life of purpose and meaning.

Moment by moment we can be conscious of our posture, the weight and shape of our body, the touch and texture of our clothing, the movement of air against our skin, the aroma in the air, we can notice how our nostrils savour the air to extract the aroma, aware of any taste in our mouth, the light, shade and colour of our surroundings or what we see behind closed eyes; we can become aware of all the sounds within and outside the space we're in and allow our listening to run right out until we hear the clouds passing by or the light of the sun shining on us; aware of the movement of the inward and outward breath, noticing the way our clothing moves against our skin as we breathe; perhaps noticing if we're breathing in more through one nostril than the other, the difference in temperature between the inward and outward breath. It's impossible to have a fully-fledged panic and do this practice at the same time. The more we practice, the more the brain settles down its unconscious electrical activity and we begin to USE our mind rather than be used BY our mind. This is a great mastery as when the mind is quiet we have access to our insight, wisdom, humour, spontaneity, creativity and intuition. These are valuable assets in life and we squander them the moment the brain is projecting into the future or into the past, reigniting stories that diminish who we are and what we are capable of.

By encouraging our children to question the beliefs they hold about themselves, about other people, about life, we can help them to see that they may have collected beliefs and opinions that aren't actually based on facts. When we make assumptions about people or situations, we are already filtering what is said or done through the judgment of our assumption. By questioning our assumptions, we can become more open-minded, more curious and inquisitive about life, and why we, and other people think and act the way we do. If we encourage empathy – the ability to feel what it is like to be in another person's shoes – we also foster understanding and compassion. This leads to more kindness, more gentleness, more humour and openness to life and its many challenges.



## 6. Self-Reflection

It is important to talk to our children about their experiences especially when they have conflicts or difficulties that have escalated into more serious arguments or fighting. Obviously, you will find it easier to have a conversation once the heat has gone out of the experience.

Start by validating what happened for the child as in, “I noticed that you felt really upset and angry about what happened. Can you share with me what actually happened for you?” This lets the child know that you are aware of their upset or distress and that you’re genuinely interested in hearing their perspective about what prompted their feelings. When you do this you ‘give permission’ to the child to have their side of the story and it brings their awareness to what it was that actually triggered the upset. Encourage them to use a language that helps them take responsibility for their feelings. Rather than say, “Jack shouldn’t have made you feel like that”, it would be better to say, “So when Jack did that, what did you feel?”

Disappointing as it may be, no one makes us feel anything! For many people, blaming others for ‘making them feel bad’ is a long-practiced habit. However, this is very limiting as it leaves us open to feeling a victim of other people’s actions. We are not responsible for other people’s actions. We *are* responsible for our own feelings and actions.

We can then ask ourselves and/or our child, “how did my/your feelings trigger my/your reaction?” and, “could I/you have responded differently? How do you think responding differently might have changed the outcome?”

Demonstrating self-reflection and encouraging it in our children allows us to acknowledge that everyone has their own perspective and perception of experiences and it assists us greatly in our friendships and relationships with other people. In order to have positive outcomes from our interactions with people, whether they’re friends, strangers, family or acquaintances, we benefit by having awareness of our own perceptions and perspective and the ability to recognise and allow that others may hold really different perspectives and perceptions. With respect, openness and collaboration we can often arrive at positive solutions or outcomes that enable everyone to feel heard and respected for their opinions.



## 7. Wrapping a Child in a Rainbow

One of the most wonderful rituals of positive connection you can instil in your child is by wrapping them in a rainbow at night before they go to sleep. You can start this ritual around age 3 although I've known many parents who started earlier. The child will have the concept of a loving connection between people they care about for the rest of time. There is a separate sheet that details the ritual and you can also go to [www.questforlife.com.au/rainbow-ritual](http://www.questforlife.com.au/rainbow-ritual) to download the instructions or watch a video that describes exactly how to wrap a child in a rainbow. This ritual has been used by tens of thousands of families for many different purposes to instil a sense of loving connection and safety. It stops nightmares and helps with sleep, anxiety or feelings of fretting when children may be separated from a parent due to illness, divorce, death, going away to camp or starting school.

One of the great benefits of wrapping children in a rainbow is that you can ask them where they would like to send a rainbow to before they go to sleep. This is when you hear from your child about the things that worry or concern them. I've known very young children of two or three who have wanted to send rainbows to people suffering through earthquakes, after fires, floods or 9/11 or to other children or their parents who are sick or going through a difficult time. It is often surprising that they are aware of these events but with television or radios often 'on' in the background, children are picking up on traumatic and tragic events happening around the world. Sending rainbows helps children feel that they have made a positive contribution rather than feeling helpless to help situations that are upsetting.



## 8. Create a Safe Space

Ultimately we all want to feel that we have a safe and stable space within ourselves that is unshaken by life's challenges. You can also create an outer space, a corner of a room, a particular chair, a garden swing or beanbag that becomes a safe space. A pair of headphones to listen to relaxation music or a meditation practice can provide a private and safe space that helps to instil a sense of calm and peace. This space can be a place where you or a child can focus on slowing down or calming themselves through deep breathing. It can be a place for reflection, prayer or relaxation. A special shawl could be kept there to wrap around the shoulders. Quite quickly, if this dedicated space is used regularly, you/a child will only have to think of that space, and a feeling of calm will descend.



## 9. Keep a Gratitude Book

Encourage family members to have conversations about things for which they feel grateful. Perhaps one mealtime a week becomes the time when everyone has an opportunity to share the things that they are grateful for that have happened or been experienced during the week. This is a wonderful activity that stimulates meaningful conversations about what each person finds important in their life.

Some children like to keep a gratitude book, where they write down all the things that they feel grateful for. This can be a powerful practice immediately before going to bed, as it helps us to be in a calm and contented state before we go to sleep.

It is an excellent practice for children who feel anxious or fearful as it trains the mind to be on the lookout for the good things in life rather than focusing on their worries.

Enlarge the scope of things to be grateful for through contact with nature. Being in nature reminds us of the interconnectedness of life. Keeping track of the phases of the moon, the rhythm of high and low tides, the way sunrises and sunsets change positions according to the seasons, the equinoxes, all these things increase our awareness of, and help children to tune into, the rhythms and cycles of nature. Watching lunar eclipses, meteor showers or (safely) seeing solar eclipses all inspire wonder and a sense of gratitude for nature.



## 10. Put Technology Aside

Have some technology-free zones in the home or in your daily schedule so that you look beyond 'the screen'. Perhaps mealtimes can be enjoyed without technology or that it is restricted to particular hours of the day. And always monitor your child's activity when they are online.

Finally, I encourage you to look up and connect, eye to eye, whenever your child enters the room. There is nothing more affirming than having your presence acknowledged by someone who, every time you enter the room, looks up and smiles at you. It demonstrates that their presence in your life is valued and appreciated. When you smile because you see your child, it conveys your love to them.

So often we are distracted by what we are doing and we barely make eye contact because of our own preoccupations. When you look at each other during a conversation you have access to a whole range of subtle communications conveyed by posture or through the hesitation or emphasis of their words or the actions that accompany their words. For example, a 'shifty' gaze that doesn't want to make eye contact may tell you something really important that needs to be addressed or further explored. If you beam with love when your child enters the room or when you pick them up in the car, you're telling them that they are precious to you and that their presence in your life brings you joy.

Most of the ideas in this handout are further explored in my book, *Your Life Matters – the Power of Living Now* published by Random House. It is not a book about parenting however, every parent would benefit by reading it as it addresses all the issues about living a meaningful life. *Your Life Matters* details the information delivered in all of our retreats at the Quest for Life Centre in Bundanoon and in our workshops in the community.

If ever we can be of service to you, your family or your loved ones, please be in touch via our website [www.questforlife.com.au](http://www.questforlife.com.au) or by calling 02-4883-6599.