

Soft Eyes

I have a challenge for you. Try to feel angry...but make your eyes soft and kind.

It's the psychological equivalent of patting your head, rubbing your belly, hopping on one leg, and sticking your tongue in and out—all at once. Perhaps it's harder. They're fundamentally incompatible. I don't think you can do both.

One of the best ways I've found to help parents guide their children successfully—particularly at those tense times when they're about to crack—is to practise “soft eyes”.

"Soft eyes" is not a term you'll find in traditional parenting literature, but it has deep psychological and neurological roots. It serves as a powerful tool for emotional regulation—not just for you but also for your child.

How Soft Eyes Help Your Child

When your child is stressed or anxious, seeing your soft eyes can send a reassuring message. Their brain's mirror neurons pick up on your calm demeanour, signalling that the environment is safe. Your gentle gaze can help them feel loved and understood, even amidst their worries.

Regulating Your Emotions

Practising soft eyes also helps you manage your own emotional responses. In high-stress situations, it can be easy to react with anger or frustration. However, adopting soft eyes allows you to engage in two important emotional regulation strategies: emotional suppression and reappraisal.

Emotional Suppression

This involves holding back your emotional responses. For example, when your kids are fighting, you might want to explode but instead maintain your calm. While this can prevent an escalation, habitual suppressors experience [impacts on wellbeing](#) such as increased levels of depressive symptoms, less life satisfaction, and [poorer social functioning](#).

Reappraisal

This is the process of changing how you interpret a situation to alter its emotional impact. When you choose to see things from your child's perspective or frame the moment in a broader context, you activate your prefrontal cortex early on, which helps calm your emotions. This makes it easier to maintain a gentle demeanour.

The Science Behind “Soft Eyes”

Putting on our soft eyes isn't about trying to influence others' feelings through eye magic (like a Jedi Knight). However, soft eyes matter for *us*. Even if we're not able to access soft eyes automatically through reappraisal, simply relieving the tension in the muscles around our eyes can influence our emotions.

One group of researchers performed [a series of experiments](#) demonstrating that furrowing the brow *increases* the temperature of blood entering the brain, making people feel negative. On the other hand, facial movements associated with smiling *reduced* the temperature of blood entering the brain and increased positive mood. (These differences are imperceptibly tiny – only 0.1 °C, and imperceptible to the person experiencing it, yet it's enough to make a measurable impact on mood and even made people dislike an imaginary scent.) This helps us understand the term “hot-headed”!

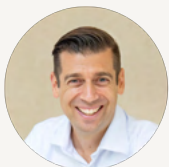
[Manipulating our facial expressions](#) has an impact on heart rate, emotional reactions, and even on brain activation in the prefrontal cortex and amygdala. In other words, sometimes soft eyes help us access our soft hearts.

Finally, while Jedi eye magic doesn't work (at least not outside the Star Wars universe), having soft eyes can create a ripple effect. [Studies](#) have shown that when one person engages in emotional regulation, their partner often mirrors that calmness, leading to a shared sense of peace. This is rooted in our [extended mirror neuron system](#), which plays a crucial role in how we connect with others emotionally.

Practical Tips for Practising Soft Eyes

1. **Pause and Breathe:** When you feel your emotions rising, take a moment to pause. Deep breaths can help you reset and shift your mindset.
2. **Relax Your Face:** Consciously soften the muscles around your eyes. Imagine a gentle smile or visualise a calming scene.
3. **Reframe the Situation:** Try to see the moment from your child's perspective. This can help you respond with empathy rather than frustration.
4. **Practice Regularly:** Incorporate moments of soft eyes into your daily routine. Whether during family meals or bedtime, soft eyes can become a habit.
5. **Model for Your Kids:** Show your children what soft eyes look like. Discuss how emotions work and encourage them to practise this technique when they're upset.

So next time you're about ready to “lose your cool”, make those eyes soft. Smile kindly. Change your face... and you'll change your mood. And that might be all it takes to make the day better for you and your kids.



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