

Emotion Coaching based on the work of John Gottman

Emotion coaching is an approach to caring for children which values their feelings while guiding their behaviours. Emotion coaching takes effort and patience. It's not necessarily easy—but it's definitely worth the effort. This approach encourages healthy emotional development so that “children delight in the happy times and recover more quickly from the bad ones.” Using emotion coaching does get easier with practice. It's like learning a new skill in sports or learning to play a musical instrument. The more we use it, the better we become.

Five Steps to Emotion Coaching

1. Be aware of your child's emotions

The first step towards helping a child learn about emotions is being aware of what a child is feeling. This awareness begins with you. Parents who understand their *own* emotions are better able to relate to their child's feelings. Sometimes it's hard to figure out our children's emotions. Your job is to try to see the world through your child's eyes and to uncover the emotion. Watch body language and listen closely to identify feelings. Help your child learn about her feelings.

EMOTIONAL AWARENESS What Can You Do?

- ☐ Recognize when your child is upset, sad, afraid, or happy.
- ☐ Stand in your child's shoes when he is struggling with an emotion & see things from his perspective.
- ☐ Listen during playtime to find clues about what makes your child anxious, scared, proud or happy.
- ☐ Share your emotions, when it's appropriate.
- ☐ CAUTION: your child is learning about emotions by watching YOU and how you handle your own feelings!

2. Recognize that emotions are an opportunity to connect

Emotions are new and sometimes overwhelming for young children. They need adults to teach them how to handle their emotions in a healthy way.

The best time to teach children about emotions is *during the experience* when the feelings are real. This means sharing the moment of feeling sad or feeling angry with a child *before* those feelings grow to a high level. Talking about feelings helps reduce their intensity. “Talking it out when you are upset” teaches children that issues can be handled when they are small, which is a key problem solving strategy. If children can learn this skill when they are young, they will be better able to manage stress later in life.

CONNECTING What Can You Do?

- ☐ Pay close attention to your child's emotions—don't dismiss or avoid them!
- ☐ Think of emotional moments as "opportunities to draw closer" to your child.
- ☐ Encourage your child to talk about her emotions and try to share in the feeling yourself.
- ☐ Share your own feelings, when it's appropriate.
- ☐ Tell your child her feelings are okay...and then offer guidance in sorting out those feelings.

Example; Adult says: "I Understand..."

"Tell me how you feel. I've felt that way, too. You can't hit somebody when you're angry."

Let's think together about other things you can when you felt this way."

Child feels: Accepted and Safe

A child feels valued and comforted when all of her emotions are accepted. At the same time, she learns that there are limits on her behaviour when she has strong feelings. She receives empathy when upset or angry and guidance in learning to deal with her emotions. She feels comfortable in expressing her emotions and she learns to trust her feelings and solve problems.

3. Listen with empathy

Two of the most important steps parents can take to help their children deal successfully with their emotions are *listening with empathy* and *supporting a child's feelings*. Comforting children with their feelings reassures them that they are not alone and lets them know their feelings are okay.

The best way to help children understand their feelings is to put their feelings into words with simple statements. Reflecting children's feelings back to them is extremely comforting (*"Oh, that made you really sad."*) It also helps them feel like someone is 'on their side.' Using reflective listening puts the parent in a better position help the child find a solution to the problem.

LISTENING What Can You Do?

- ☐ Encourage your child to share what he is feeling. (*"Tell me what happened/Tell me what you're feeling..."*)
- ☐ Reflect your child's feeling back to her by saying, *"It sounds like you are feeling _____."*

- ☐ Don't dismiss emotions as silly or unimportant. Never criticize your child's feelings.
- ☐ Listen in a way that helps your child know you are paying attention and taking her seriously. (*"You didn't like it when he said that to you. That really hurt your feelings."*)
- ☐ Find a way to show your child that you understand what he or she is feeling. (*"So you don't want to play with him any more today. You just want to play by yourself."*)

4. Help your child name emotions

Children don't always know the words to talk about what they are feeling. They don't know how to make sense of complicated emotions that overtake them, like jealousy, hurt, fear, or worry.

Research shows that when children can *name* their feelings, they can handle them better. Naming emotions helps different brain areas communicate with each other, which in turn helps children calm themselves. This process is called learning "emotional regulation," which is a critical coping skill needed for managing life's up's and down's.

Naming emotions can be tricky. Children can feel mixed emotions, just like us. It takes a little detective work to identify exactly what a child is feeling. Ask 'door-opening' questions, look for clues in a child's tone of voice, and watch body language. The wonderful thing about children is that they are very, very forgiving. If you try naming an emotion and you're off-base, they'll let you know (*"No, I'm not sad...I'm mad!"*) Children desperately want to be understood, so if you just keep listening, they'll keep trying to make clear to you what they are feeling.

NAMING EMOTIONS

What Can You Do?

- ☐ Start to name emotions early—even before your child can talk. (*"Oh, you're really mad!"*)
- ☐ Work very hard to identify the emotions your child is feeling, instead of telling her what she ought to feel
- ☐ Listen in a way that helps children know you are paying attention and taking them seriously
- ☐ Find a way to show your child that you understand what he or she is feeling—don't judge or criticize the emotion

5. Set limits and find good solutions

Learning positive ways to express emotions is an important life lesson. The challenge for parents is to accept children's emotions while setting limits on children's inappropriate behaviour.

Setting limits is the first step in any good problem-solving. Once adults have made clear what children shouldn't do, the next step is helping kids come up with what they can do to solve their problem. This teaches children to find their own solution to problems.

Problem-solving can take some practice. First, help your child figure out what his **need** is or what he wants. Next, help him **generate his own ideas** about how he could solve the problem: *"What do you think you could do? How could you get someone to play with you?"*

Try not to judge your child's ideas at this point. Lastly, talk about how his ideas will work. Try to **ask 'thinking questions'** rather than making critical comments. (*"How do you think that would work?"* rather than, *"That will never work!"*) Then, help your child **pick an acceptable solution**.

Example: Child makes a hurtful comment to another child in the sandbox. Parent pulls child aside, out of the sandbox.

Parent to child: *"That hurt Timmy's feelings! We don't use hurting words. You sound pretty upset."*

Child: *"I wanted to play with that truck but he got it first."*

Parent: *"You really want a turn with that truck."*

Child: *"Yes!! I saw it first, but he got it. It's not fair! I want a turn!"*

Parent: *"I can see that you're really frustrated! You don't think it's fair that he got it first."*

Child: *"Yeah..."*

Parent: *"You want to play with that truck, too. What could you do to make that happen?"*

Child: *"I could go take it from him."*

Parent: *"Well, that's one idea...do you have any other ideas?"*

Child: *"I could see if he wants to share it...or I could ask him if he wants to see my new hot wheels car."*

Parent: *"Or, you could ask him if you could play with the truck when he's finished....?"*

Child: *"I guess so..."*

Parent: *"Let's see...which do you think you want to try?"*

Child: (Child starts to walk away...towards the other child in sandbox) *"I'm going to see if he wants to play with me.Hey, Timmy, do you want to see my new car?"*

In this example, the child has solved his problem with facilitation from an adult. His parent has named and accepted his emotions, while giving a clear limit on his negative behaviour. His parent encouraged him to figure out what he wanted to do, without imposing her solution. In fact, he showed he felt "finished" by seeming satisfied and walking away from his parent, and no longer feeling upset.

FINDING GOOD SOLUTIONS What Can You Do?

- ☐ Discipline misbehaving children for what they *do*, not for how they feel.
- ☐ Use misbehaviour as a 'teaching time' to help your child understand his emotion: give that feeling a name and explain why the behaviour was unacceptable.
- ☐ When your child has a problem, help him: (1) think about what he wants to see happen, (2) think of several ideas for doing this, and (3) pick a solution.

SOME FINAL TIPS:

- ☐ Be patient.
- ☐ Be honest with your child.
- ☐ Avoid making critical, humiliating comments or mocking a child.
- ☐ Build on small successes to boost a child's confidence.
- ☐ Be aware of a child's needs, both physical and emotional.
- ☐ Identify what a child enjoys and what she doesn't enjoy.
- ☐ Avoid "siding with the enemy" when your child feels mistreated.
- ☐ Empower a child by giving choices and respecting his wishes.

Flipping Your Lid!



- Point to your wrist.

The part that is closest to your spine and near the base of your skull is called the *brain stem*. It keeps you awake or asleep, makes sure you breathe and makes sure your heart keeps beating. It also keeps you safe.

- Fold your thumb across your palm.

The middle part of your brain is where you process emotions and store your memories. It is called the limbic system. It is also where you have your "safety radar" (your *amygdala*).



- Fold your fingers over your thumb so you have a fist.

The outer layer of your brain is called the *cortex*. It is where your thinking and planning happens.

- Point to your fingernails.

The area of the cortex that is right up front is the *prefrontal cortex*.

It is where the brain processes information about how we relate to others:

- ✓ Understanding others' feelings
- ✓ Ability to calm ourselves
- ✓ Ability to make choices
- ✓ Morality
- ✓ Ability to sense what is going on for others (read body language)

When we are really stressed or upset, the prefrontal cortex shuts down and no longer works with the rest of our brain.

➤ Lift the fingers up so they are straight and the thumb is still across the palm. We say, we "flip our lid".

We "flip our lid" when the thinking part (prefrontal cortex) of our brain isn't working (it is no longer working in harmony with our limbic system and brain stem). It becomes hard to use our problem solving skills.

Emotion Coaching and Problem Solving Exercise

Think back to a behavioural issue or challenge that has come up during the last week or two.

1. *Describe the problem/behaviour you are currently experiencing with your child.*
2. *Using the 5 Steps of Emotions Coaching and 5 Steps of Problem Solving, how would you work through this scenario with your child? (simplified to 3 steps in grid below)*

Recognize the lower intensity emotions, connect with your child, listen empathetically and validate their experience
Help child label their emotion
Set the limit with problem-solving:
a. Set the limit
b. Identify goal or motivation of child
c. Brainstorm solutions
d. Evaluate solutions
e. Allow child to choose their solution

Teaching Children Emotional Literacy

Using varied and complex feeling words will develop powerful feeling vocabularies for children. Here is a list of more complex feeling words that 3-5 year olds who are developing language normally know (Joseph, 2001; Ridge-way, Waters & Kuczaj, 1985).

Labelling a child's affective state allows them to begin to identify their own internal states. This is an important step in learning to regulate emotions (Joseph, 2001; Lochman & Dunn, 1993; Webster-Stratton, 1999).

How many are you labelling for children each day?

Affectionate	Enjoying	Peaceful
Agreeable	Excited	Pleasant
Annoyed	Fantastic	Proud
Awful	Fearful	Relaxed
Bored	Fed-Up	Relieved
Brave	Free	Safe
Calm	Friendly	Satisfied
Capable	Frustrated	Sensitive
Careful	Gentle	Serious
Caring	Generous	Shy
Cheerful	Gloomy	Stressed
Clumsy	Guilty	Strong
Comfortable	Ignored	Stubborn
Confused	Impatient	Tense
Cooperative	Important	Thoughtful
Creative	Interested	Thrilled
Cruel	Jealous	Troubled
Curious	Joyful	Uncomfortable
Depressed	Lonely	Weary
Disappointed	Lost	Worried

Which Emotional Style Do You Use? (adapted from What Am I Feeling? John Gottman, 2004.)

The “Emotionally-Dismissive” parent/ teacher

Says:

“You don’t need to be sad. It’s not that bad. Put a smile on your face. There’s no reason to be unhappy.”

The child feels:

Ignored or disregarded when she has strong feelings. She learns that emotions are “bad” and need to be “fixed” quickly. She doesn’t learn how to handle her emotions, and has trouble with other children’s emotions.

These children may:

- ☐ Feel diminished or dismissed
- ☐ Are reluctant to come to you when they feel sad or angry
- ☐ Begin to dis-miss their own feelings and the feelings of others

The “Emotionally-Disapproving” parent/ teacher

Says:

“Stop crying! You can’t join us until you stop the crying. I can’t read the story with you crying. Do you want me to call Miss Smith (Head teacher) in to come and talk to you?”

The child feels:

Upset and now that you tell him that he’s wrong, he feels even worse. He feels criticized or punished for showing emotions even when he does not misbehave. He is never taught what to call the strong feelings he has or what to do with them.

These children may:

- ☐ Have more difficulty trusting their own judgment
- ☐ Feel something is wrong with them
- ☐ Have trouble regulating their emotions or solving their problems

The “Emotions-Are-Good-Let-Them-All-Out” parent/ teacher

Says:

“That’s it, just let your feelings out. You can hit and kick the pillow over there.”

The child feels:

Comfortable in expressing her feelings and knows that it’s acceptable to show emotions, whatever they are. But, there are no limits on her behaviour and little guidance as to how to deal with her strong emotions.

These children may:

- ☐ Don’t learn to regulate their emotions
- ☐ Have trouble concentrating
- ☐ Have trouble forming friendships
- ☐ Have trouble getting along with other children

The parent/ teacher as “Emotional Coach”

Says:

“Tell me how you feel. I’ve felt that way, too. You can’t hit somebody when you’re angry. Let’s think together about other things you can do when you feel this way.”

The child feels:

Valued and comforted when all of her emotions are accepted. At the same time, she learns that there are limits on her behaviour when she has strong feelings.

These children may:

- ☐ Learn to trust their feelings
- ☐ Regulate their own emotions
- ☐ Solve problems
- ☐ Have high self-esteem
- ☐ Learn well
- ☐ Get along well with others