

## ***Emotion Coaching***

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During the last few decades, researchers have increasingly come to understand how important it is to understand our emotions and handle them in a healthy way. The term “emotional intelligence,” introduced by Daniel Goleman (1995) in a book by the same name, has become common in both research literature and books written for the general public.

Emotional intelligence is learned, and a child’s first teacher about emotions is his or her parents. You can help your child develop emotional intelligence by “coaching” him, using principles researchers have found work well. “Emotion coaching” can help you avoid common pitfalls as you guide your children toward becoming successful, happy adults.

### **What Is Emotion Coaching?**

Emotion coaching is helping children understand the different emotions they experience, why they occur, and how to handle them. In the simplest terms, you can coach your children about emotions by comforting them, listening and understanding their thoughts and feelings, and helping them understand themselves. As you do this, your children will feel loved, supported, respected, and valued. With this emotionally supportive foundation, you will be much more successful at setting limits and problem solving.

Emotion coaching helps children gain skills that will help them love and serve, including becoming comfortable with their own feelings and learning to express their emotions in constructive ways.

### ***Benefits to Your Children of Emotion Coaching***

The better you are at emotion coaching your children, the better you can prepare them to become happy and healthy adults. Researchers have found that children who feel love and support have more friendships and live healthier, more successful lives. They also are at lower risk for youth violence, antisocial behavior, drug addiction, premature sexual activity, and adolescent suicide.

According to John Gottman, author of the book *Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child*, “Researchers have found that even more than your IQ, your emotional awareness and your ability to handle feelings will determine your success and happiness in all walks of life, including family relationships” (1997: 20).

### ***Learning How to Emotion Coach***

While emotion coaching may seem complicated at first, as you practice you’ll find that it becomes second nature.

**Step 1: Understand how *you* deal with feelings.** Before you can become an emotion coach, you must first understand your own approach to emotions. Some parents, for example, are uncomfortable with their child’s negative

emotions. If a child feels sad, you might think that if you fix the problem that created the sadness, the sadness will go away. You might be uncomfortable with your own anger because it makes you feel out of control, and in turn you discourage anger in your children.

Gottman suggests several questions you can ask yourself to discover why you feel the way you do about emotions.

- Did your parents treat sad and angry moments as natural occurrences?
- Did your parents lend an ear when family members felt unhappy, fearful, or angry?
- Did your family use times of unhappiness, fear, or anger to show each other support, offer guidance, and help each other solve problems?
- Was anger always viewed as potentially destructive? If so, what did this teach you about how to handle your anger? Are you taking this same approach with your children?
- Was fear looked on as cowardly? If so, how did you learn to handle fear?
- Was sadness seen as self-pity in your family? What ways were you taught to handle sadness?
- Were sadness, anger and fear shoved under the blanket or dismissed as unproductive, frivolous, dangerous, or self-indulgent?

**Research has shown that parents who have become good at emotion coaching believe the following about emotions:**

- Their child's feelings are important.
- Their child's feelings and wishes are okay, even if their actions aren't.
- Experiencing negative emotions, such as sadness, anger or fear, is important.
- Negative feelings are a chance for parents and children to grow closer.
- Understanding what causes their child's feelings is important.
- Negative feelings are an opportunity for problem-solving.

**Step 2: Believe that your child's negative emotions are an opportunity for closeness and teaching.** Reasoning away your child's emotion with logic rarely works. Parents who try to do this usually end up arguing with their child. Instead, a child's negative feelings are become integrated when children talk about them, label them, and feel understood. When children feel understood by their parents, they feel closer to them.

James, a college freshman, came home one evening frustrated and bewildered, announcing long and loud that he didn't understand material in one class. "Everyone else gets it and I don't!" He declared. Initially Dad told his son to calm down and stop obsessing so much, but this only made matters worse. Eventually Dad realized that his son needed to vent the negative feelings and have his concerns understood. This area of study was one that Dad knew well, so after understanding, Dad helped James work through some exercises until he understood the principles and was making good progress on the assigned work.

When James felt understood, he was open to receiving some guidance from his dad. And James felt closer to his dad because he understood and took the time to help him.

**Step 3: Listen with empathy and understanding, then validate your child's feelings.** In the book *Between Parent and Child*, psychologist Haim Ginott discusses his belief that children need to be understood before they can accept correction. If you want to understand your child, you need to put yourself in his or her shoes. Empathic listening can help you do this. Empathic listening is the heart of emotion coaching.

John Gottman says empathic listeners do the following:

- Use their eyes to identify physical evidence of their child's emotions, such as a suddenly reduced appetite.
- Use their ears to hear the underlying messages behind what a child is saying.
- Use their imaginations to put themselves in their child's shoes to understand how they're feeling.
- Use words to reflect back what they hear, see, and imagine in a soothing, non-judgmental way. These words also help the child label the emotion.
- Use their hearts to feel what their child is feeling.

Once your child feels understood, let her know that her feelings and wishes are okay, even if her actions aren't. The following tips will help you listen empathetically and validate your child's feelings:

**Share simple observations.** Say what you see and hear rather than ask probing questions. Children often don't know what they're feeling or why they're experiencing a feeling. For example, six-year-old Elizabeth is much quieter than usual. She eats her afternoon snack with little enthusiasm before trudging off to her room. Her mother silently notices all this, and then makes the observation, "Elizabeth, you seem quiet today." When Elizabeth hardly responds, her mother offers a second observation. "Often when I'm quiet, I'm worried about something." Elizabeth then opens up to her mother and confides her worries about her friends at school.

**Avoid questions you already know the answer to.** When you ask questions like "Who muddied the carpet?" - knowing very well the answer - you create an environment of mistrust. Instead, be direct: "You muddied the carpet; I'm disappointed."

**Share examples from your own life.** This helps children feel that what they're experiencing is normal.

**Step 4: Label your child's emotions.** Children often don't know what they're feeling. If you label an action - observe aloud that they seem "angry" or "sad" or "disappointed" - you can help your child transform a scary, uncomfortable feeling into something identifiable and normal. Researchers have shown that the simple act of labeling an emotion has a soothing effect on the nervous

system, which helps children recover more quickly from an upsetting experience.

Often a chance to label an emotion comes up when you're listening empathically. Keep in mind that it's easy to fall into the trap of telling your child how he *ought* to feel instead of *what* he is feeling. For example, four-year-old Jared announces that he hates his friend Billy because Billy took his toy, then hit him when Jared tried to get his toy back. His mom, instead of telling Jared that he doesn't hate Billy and that he actually likes Billy because they are friends, says, "It sounds like you're pretty angry that Billy took your toy and hit you."

**Step 5: Set limits while exploring possible solutions to the problem that caused the negative emotion.** John Gottman describes several parts to this step.

**Set limits.** Even though it's important to validate your child's feelings, you don't have to validate their actions. Once you set a limit on inappropriate behaviour and its consequences, follow through and be consistent. The ideal time to use emotion coaching is right after your child misbehaves and before you deal out the consequence. For example, a parent might say, "You're mad that Danny took that game away from you. I would be, too. But it's not okay for you to hit him. What can you do instead?"

**Identify goals.** After you've followed through on consequences for inappropriate behaviour, identify the goal your child was trying to reach with his or her behaviour. Simply ask your child what he was trying to accomplish.

**Think of possible solutions.** Allow your child to think up solutions to a problem situation before you offer suggestions. This helps your child develop problem-solving skills. Don't shoot down his solutions if they're not workable. Instead, ask questions that will help him see the outcome of his solutions.

**Evaluate the proposed solutions based on your family values.** When your child suggests solutions, ask questions like:

- "Is this solution fair?"
- "Will this solution work?"
- "Is it safe?"
- "How are you likely to feel? How are other people likely to feel?"

**Help your child choose a solution.** If your child comes up with an unworkable solution, it is okay to go forward as long as it is harmless. Let her learn from seeing the consequences of her choices. Just leave the door open to rework the solution if it doesn't seem to be working. Also help your child come up with a plan of action to accomplish the solution.

For more information on emotion coaching, check out *Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child: The Heart of Parenting* by John Gottman. For more information on how to listen with empathy and validate your child, read *Between Parent and Child*, by Haim Ginott.