

I Answered an Unknown Number During Filming

The Parenting Breakthrough that Happened Between Takes

A couple of weeks back I was in Sydney filming Season Three of *Parental Guidance*. Studio days are long. It's demanding work. (I'm thrilled to say that the show is going to be amazing *again* this time around!)

During a brief break, my phone rang. **"Unknown number."** I hesitated. I only had about five minutes before I had to be back in hair and makeup. I had no idea who was calling me, and I needed to be in the right headspace for the next studio session. It was going to be a heavy one.

I glanced at the number on the screen again. No idea. And then, impulsively, I answered.

"Hello, this is Justin."

"Daddy?" The sobbing, nearly inaudible voice belonged to my 14-year-old daughter, Lilli. Her tears told me everything I needed to know. My little girl was not doing well.

What would you normally say in this situation? *"What's wrong? Talk to me. What happened? Why are you crying?"*

With the best of intentions, this is where we typically begin to interrogate our child. I chose a different path.

"Oh, Lilli. You're crying. It sounds like you're having an awful day." I stopped. Waited. Then, *"I'm here for you if you feel like talking."*

Lilli opened up like a flower after rain. She was on school camp, distressed, and calling from a teacher's phone (since phones were, rightly, banned). A boy had fat-shamed her. Several of the kids were creating challenges. She was struggling with their immaturity. And camp felt awful.

When Emotions Run High, Intelligence Runs Low

Our children's big emotions create ripple effects throughout their lives. For our child, these emotions can leave them feeling disconnected from us and others. They derail interest in school, learning, hobbies, and engagement in life itself.

For us as parents, big emotions (either in our child or ourselves) cloud judgement and decision-making. They hijack our effectiveness, making it difficult to concentrate on anything else.

In short, high emotions = low intelligence.

Emotion Coaching: The Science Behind the Approach

Pioneering research by Dr John Gottman has revealed that children whose parents practice “*emotion coaching*” develop stronger emotional intelligence and resilience. In his landmark studies published in “*Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child*,” Gottman found that emotion-coached children experience fewer behavioural problems, higher academic achievement, better social relationships, and improved physical health compared to their peers.

The research shows these children develop greater self-regulation skills and the ability to calm themselves in stressful situations. Most importantly, the parent-child relationship benefits from deeper trust and connection, creating a secure base from which children can explore their world with confidence.

The Five Steps of Effective Emotion Coaching

Coming home from camp was not an option for Lilli. Instead, I followed these five crucial steps to support her through her emotional moment—and no, you don’t need a psychology PhD to do this:

- 1. Be emotionally stable and mentally present:** I took a deep breath, centred myself, and gave Lilli my complete attention despite the studio pressures waiting for me. Your calm creates a safe harbour in their emotional storm.
- 2. Say what you see—no judgement or direction:** “*Lilli, that sounds so hard. This must feel so rough.*” Simple observations acknowledge their experience without telling them how they should feel or behave.
- 3. Offer to hug, help, or hear them:** “*I’m here for you if you feel like talking.*” This gives them options while assuring them of your unconditional support.
- 4. Let them process with your strength and support:** I remained silently supportive as Lilli worked through her feelings. Your steady presence gives them the security to experience difficult emotions fully.
- 5. Ask how they want to move forward:** “*What do you think might help in this situation?*” This empowers them to develop their own solutions while knowing you’re ready to guide if needed.

Whether your child is 4, 14, or the 44-year-old partner you married, these steps serve as a powerful guide.

Sometimes you do have to step in, make decisions, and take action. But more often, your child simply needs you to be there emotionally. Not as a therapist. As a parent who listens.

Support. Don't solve.



Dr Justin Coulson is a dad to 6 daughters and grandfather to 1 granddaughter. He is the parenting expert and co-host of Channel Nine’s Parental Guidance, and he and his wife host Australia’s #1 podcast for parents and family: The Happy Families Podcast. He has written 9 books about families and parenting. For further details visit happyfamilies.com.au.