The Five Steps of Emotion Coaching

From the very first time children wrinkle their brows, smile at a parent’s face, or give a hearty cry, it’s obvious that emotions are an important part of being human. Feelings are a natural part of who we are, but understanding feelings is one of life’s most important lessons.

We spend a lot of time teaching our children simple things such as tying their shoes, but we often expect them to learn how to handle complex feelings like anger, sadness, and frustration without much help. Research studies make it clear that children are healthier when parents nurture, support, and encourage their emotional development.

That’s the idea behind Emotion Coaching—a five-step approach to parenting that can help create stronger family bonds while preparing children to cope with the powerful world of emotions they face every day.

Research by Dr. John Gottman shows that children who can understand and cope with emotions do better in school, form stronger relationships, have fewer behavioral problems, and generally lead happier, healthier, and less stressful lives. Gottman’s Emotion Coaching approach gives parents and caregivers a method to use in helping kids learn these skills.

Five Steps of Emotion Coaching

Step 1 Be aware of emotions
Tune into your child’s feelings and your own.

Step 2 Connect with your child
Use emotional moments as opportunities to connect with your child.

Step 3 Listen to your child
Respect your child’s feelings by taking time to listen to them carefully.

Step 4 Name emotions
Help your child identify and name emotions.

Step 5 Find solutions
Explore solutions to problems together.

Although parents were the focus of Dr. Gottman’s research, this information is appropriate for all who nurture and care for children. Note: No parent or caregiver can be an Emotion Coach all of the time. Even the most skilled parents only use Emotion Coaching about 30 percent of the time. There are some situations when Emotion Coaching just isn’t possible. The good news is, even if you missed an opportunity to use Emotion Coaching, it’s not too late. Even hours later, you can talk with your child about what happened and describe how you were both feeling. Emotion Coaching is about valuing emotions and showing your child you care.

Step 1 – Be Aware of Emotions

Tune in to your child’s feeling and your own.

It’s not difficult to figure out that your child is angry or sad when a sibling breaks her favorite toy. And it’s a pretty safe bet that a child who is wearing a big smile is feeling happy and content. But sometimes, a child’s emotions are less obvious and it might take a little detective work—like looking at a child’s body language, listening for hints in a child’s tone of voice, and searching for clues in a child’s face—to uncover hidden feelings.

Look for clues.

Many young children use playtime as an opportunity to express their own fears and uncertainties. For example, if a young girl is happily cuddling her doll, might say, “Molly doesn’t like it when mommy and daddy yell at each other.” Take note when this happens. Children often use characters and scenes during make-believe to talk about difficult or confusing feelings.

Nightmares can also offer a glimpse into the child’s emotional world. Even at a young age, our subconscious mind finds ways of dealing with emotions that our conscious mind avoids. Comfort your child after a bad dream, explain the difference between dreams and reality, and keep an ear open for the real-life issues.

Being aware of a child’s emotions is the foundation for a healthy parent-child relationship. So how does your ability to recognize and understand your child’s emotions create this bond? Awareness of these emotions creates the chance for you to connect with a child on an emotional level, to share the ups and downs of life, and to guide and nurture him to healthy emotional development. Research tells us that children who are emotionally healthy are more likely to be self-confident, do better in school, have fewer behavioral problems, and get along better with friends and others.

To know your child, know yourself.

Research has found that parents who were in touch with their own emotions were better able to relate to their children’s feelings.

How do you handle your emotions—especially negative emotions like anger or sadness? How do your emotions change throughout the day? How many ‘emotion words’ do you use like frustration, worry, joy, and mad?

Being aware of a child’s emotions can take work. But parents and caregivers who are aware of a child’s feelings are more likely to offer support and understanding during times of anger, sadness, and frustration. They are also better able to celebrate during positive moments of joy, happiness, and laughter.
Step 2 – Connect with Your Child

Use emotional moments as opportunities to connect with your child.

Parenting can be stressful. Many parents can share a child's happiness when they have learned a new skill. However, it can be hard not to feel frustrated with a child who throws a tantrum in the grocery store because you won't buy his favorite cookies. These emotional moments are when kids need to turn to adults and caregivers. The response they receive for their feelings can have a dramatic effect on the way they behave.

Whether happy or sad, children’s emotions offer parents two very important opportunities:

1) to build a deeper and more trusting relationship
2) to teach children about human feelings.

Research has found that children whose parents respond to their emotions with empathy and patience are more self-confident, have fewer behavioral problems, and get along better with friends. These benefits also appear to have long-lasting effects. Children who develop strong emotional health may be better prepared to deal with difficult events and relationships as teenagers and adults.

How do you deal with emotions?

We are all wired to deal with emotions differently. Some parents are more likely to dismiss their child's feelings as silly and unimportant. If a kid is feeling hurt or sad, they might say, "That's life, and the sooner you realize that the better." Others see emotions like sadness or anger as dangerous or harmful, and try to help their children by replacing them with more positive, happy feelings. For others, displays of emotions make them uncomfortable. They may try to avoid or ignore their children's feelings, resorting to bribery or threats to control their children's behavior. All of these approaches can actually do more harm than good. Emotions are not something to be dismissed or ignored; they are a normal part of being a fully functioning person.

Show how emotions work.

For young children, emotions are new and sometimes overwhelming. Whether it's an angry outburst or a quiet pout, how a parent acts in the emotional moment is critical. Parents who take the time to listen to their children, understand what they might be feeling, and guide their responses during emotional moments are connecting. Not only are their children more likely to see mom and dad as important friends and allies during tough times, they are also learning how to deal with emotions in a healthy way.

Step 3 – Listen to Your Child

Respect your child's feelings by taking time to listen carefully.

Imagine this situation: your child has been invited to a friend's birthday party. When it is time to open presents, he begins to cry. You know what is wrong—he is sad the presents are not for him. No matter how many times you try to explain that he will get presents when it is his birthday, he won't stop whining. You are confused. Why doesn't he listen to your explanation? Why is he getting more upset? Why won't he just be happy like the other kids?

What's a parent to do?

Imagine the situation at the birthday party again, but instead of telling your child how you think he should feel—in this case, happy—you simply ask him how he is feeling. Then listen carefully. If he can't tell you, you can help him identify his feelings. You could say: "You look sad. I bet you wish you were getting some presents too."

Listening with empathy and validating a child's feelings—whether happy or sad—are two of the most important steps to take to help children learn to deal successfully with the wonderful world of emotions. After all, it is common for a child to want presents. Knowing that an adult will listen and try to understand what he is feeling can be just the kind of comfort he needs. Also, once you give your child a word to describe the emotion he is feeling "sad," he may communicate his feelings without whining next time. This can have a calming effect.

Listen and watch.

Connecting with your child starts by listening and observing. By listening to your child's words, you show that his feelings matter. Children express emotions in lots of ways, and parents can learn to "read" these emotions by watching for certain cues. These cues might include facial expressions (like a furrowed brow) or body language (hands in fists, or a body posture that seems down). The words children use and the way they say them (tone of voice, certain words emphasized) reveal their attitudes and the message they want to send.

Become a friend and ally.

Here's where parents can really become coaches. The most effective way to help a child understand what she feels is to help put her feelings into words. To do this, use simple statements, such as "I feel sad when my friends don't want to play with me too."

Reflecting the child's feelings back is not only comforting, but it can also make a child feel that you are both a friend and an ally. It puts the parent in a better position to help the child find a solution to the problems she is facing. That is the key to listening with empathy and validating your child's feelings. Parents who are tuned in to their child's emotions can turn life's problems into teaching opportunities. By helping children discover their emotions, parents not only offer comfort, they give their kids skills that will serve them well for the rest of their lives.
Step 4 – Name Emotions

Help your child identify and name emotions.

Anger...sadness...frustration. These feelings happen naturally for children. How do you help them learn to cope with these emotions in a way that promotes both their mental and their physical health? The answer can be as simple as naming these feelings.

Children often lack the basic vocabulary necessary to make sense of the emotion they feel, whether it is jealousy, sadness, fear, or worry. Parents who tell a child with tears streaming down her cheeks, “You are feeling sad now, aren’t you?” or a child in the midst of a foot-stomping tantrum, “I can see you are feeling angry,” perform an important task. They teach their children to name their emotions and give them a valuable, lifelong skill.

Putting a name to the emotion not only helps children make sense of what they are feeling, but it shows empathy. For some parents, a child’s emotional outburst can be a time of intense frustration. For others, it provides an opportunity to grow closer to their child. Labeling an emotion not only gives children a word for what they are feeling, it shows that they are understood, something many find comforting.

Soothe the child.

While naming emotions may seem simple, it is an advanced skill for understanding feelings. Science provides us with emerging answers to the question of how naming emotions helps.

Studies show that the act of naming an emotion has a quieting effect on the nervous system, which may in turn help children to recover faster from emotional stress. Verbalizing an emotion engages the language area in the left side of the brain, which is an area involved in logic and other higher-level types of thinking. Naming an emotion stimulates the nerve cells in this area, which may activate connections between this “logic” area and areas of emotion processing. Activating these connections may help a child think about the emotion in a different way, leading to a calming effect.

Labeling emotions seems like a simple approach, but sometimes it is not as easy as it sounds. First, caregivers need to be aware of what their children are feeling so that they can help find the best word to describe those feelings. This can be tricky. Like adults, children can experience mixed emotions. A child with a new baby brother or sister on the way may feel both excited for the new arrival and anxious about the way life at home will change.

By talking about emotions, parents can help children develop a rich and accurate vocabulary for their emotions and learn how to manage their feelings.

Step 5 – Find Solutions

Explore solutions to problems together.

Kids show their emotions in many different ways. They giggle when they are happy. They moan when they are blue. Sometimes, though, they do things they shouldn’t: hit because of anger, break toys because of jealousy, or bite because of frustration. How parents respond can have a big effect on the child’s emotional development.

For children, especially young ones, learning acceptable ways of expressing emotions can be one of the most important lessons in life. The challenge for parents is to accept and value the child’s emotions while setting limits on inappropriate behavior. Setting limits for children is our job as adults. There are simply some things that are not options—like refusing to buckle up before driving in the car, running out into traffic, or hitting another person. Setting limits is part of a successful problem-solving strategy.

Feelings vs. behavior

Emotion Coaching theory suggests that adults need to communicate to their children that all feelings are acceptable, but not all behavior is acceptable. For example, a child may be angry at his brother—but that doesn’t mean he can hit him. The angry feelings are understandable, but the behavior of hitting his brother is not OK.

Parents can use a child’s inappropriate outburst as an opportunity for teaching by trying the following approach:

1. Explain that his or her actions were wrong and won’t be tolerated.
2. Help the child understand what emotion(s) he or she is feeling.
3. Name the emotion(s).
4. Help him or her to find a better solution.

Here is an example of what a parent using this strategy could say to a child who ripped a coloring book out of anger:

1. “Ripping your sister’s coloring book is not OK.” (This explains the action was wrong.)
2. “I understand she took your crayons with asking and that made you mad.” (This helps her understand what she is feeling.)
3. “I would be angry too.” (This statement names the emotions.)
4. “Now, can you think of a different thing you could do?” (This helps the child realize that there might be a better solution.)

For example, the child might say, “I can share my coloring book.” The father can say, “That would be very nice,” which supports the child’s decision.

Helping kids learn the best way to solve problems can take some practice. Creative thinking helps. This can be challenging with young children, because they often have a hard time keeping more than one option in mind. Although it can take a while, it’s important for the child to learn to come up with his or her own ideas about solving problems. Try not to be critical of these ideas—even if you don’t feel like the solution is quite as good as the idea you had in mind.

Set limits and find solutions.

How do setting limits and problem solving support your children’s overall emotional development? First, you are teaching your child how to get along with others. When you acknowledge a child’s feelings, you show that the feelings matter to you. You also can provide (and model) empathy by showing that you’ve had those feelings too. By teaching children to problem solve, you are giving them skills and strategies they will need to deal with other emotional moments.

Understanding emotions and being a problem solver are big skills for little kids. Help your child recognize emotions and learn the difference between appropriate and inappropriate behavior.
Anyone Can Become An Emotion Coach!

It just takes a little patience, and practice.
Emotion Coaching is a research-based tool that helps parents learn to value and guide the feelings a child experiences. This includes the sadness a child might feel over a friend moving away and the anger at an older brother who took a favorite toy. Being an Emotion Coach for your child will improve your relationship and teach your child how to respond to emotions—valuable skills that will last a lifetime.

**Step 1 Be aware of emotions**
- The more aware you are of your own feelings, the better you will understand how your child is feeling.
- When appropriate, share your emotions with your child.
- Children are learning about emotions by watching how you show yours.
- Listen to your child for clues about what she is feeling.

**Step 2 Connect with your child**
- Take your child’s emotions seriously.
- Be willing to understand your child’s perspective.
- Encourage your child to talk about feelings.

**Step 3 Listen to your child**
- Listen to your child in a way that lets her know you are paying attention.
- Try not to judge or criticize emotions that are different from what you expected.
- Research shows that it is important to understand the emotion before you give advice on the behavior.

**Step 4 Name emotions**
- Start identifying emotions even before a child can talk.
- Talk about emotions like happy, sad, and angry and when people feel them. You might role play with puppets.
- Name a range of emotions. Talk about what these emotions mean and when people feel them.
- Avoid telling children what they ought to feel—try to identify the emotions they are feeling.
- Model identifying your own emotions—children learn by watching and copying what adults do.

**Step 5 Find solutions**
- When children misbehave, explain why their behavior was inappropriate or hurtful.
- Find solutions for what they did, not for how they feel.
- Give your child time to suggest solutions, and when possible, follow his lead in picking a solution.

For more information on parenting and early learning, or to order copies of this spotlight, visit www.ParentingCounts.org.

References: