

# EMOTION COACHING

## What is Emotion Coaching?

Emotion coaching is a three step process adults use which teaches children and young people to understand about the different emotions that they experience, why they occur and how to handle them.

The adult 'emotion coach' uses moments of heightened emotions to guide and teach children and young people about more effective ways to manage. Emotion coaching focuses on the emotions which are driving the individuals behaviour, whether it is a conscious or unconscious choice. The adult takes an empathetic approach, labelling the emotions the child is experiencing, sets limits on behaviour and problem solves with the child about what they could do differently. The key belief is that all emotions are acceptable, but not all behaviour.



## THE PSYCHOLOGICAL UNDERPINNING

### Emotional Development

Emotion coaching is based on the premise that all emotions of fear, anger, sadness, joy and disgust are innate and universal. These emotions guide actions to adapt behaviour to ensure survival.

Gottman et al. (1996) identified links between parents' Meta-Emotion Philosophies –*the way we think and feel about our own emotions and the emotions of others*–, parenting styles and their children's ability to regulate emotion. His research identified four types of emotional styles:

- Emotionally Dismissive
- Emotionally Disapproving
- Laissez-Faire
- Emotion Coaching

The effects of an emotionally dismissing or disapproving style have a negative effect on a child's emotional development. From this, children learn not to trust their own feelings; that emotions are bad, develop low self-esteem and use maladaptive techniques to regulate emotions. These maladaptive strategies often result in challenging behaviour.

### Attachment

For emotional and psychological good health a child needs to have secure attachments with significant adult/s and experience environments that provide consistent and warm relationships (Bowlby, 1988).

Through attuned, social interactions caregivers guide children's thoughts, feelings and behaviour which helps develop the child's Internal Working Model. Research in Attachment has shown how emotion-focused talk by the adult can teach the child to use appropriate strategies to cope with stress, helping to build the architecture of their brains. (Bowlby 1988; Schore 1994)

There are many factors that pose risk to the quality of attachment between a child and their caregiver, such as trauma and loss. The effects of trauma often result in over-active brain stem, which is used for fight, flight and freeze responses. The over-use of this brain part results in an inactive pre-frontal cortex. This part of the brain is responsible for empathy, logic, cause and effect and reasoning.

### Interpersonal Neurobiology

A child's development is determined by the quality of their attachment and experiences. When a child is young, the positive interactions with the primary caregiver stimulate the release of neurochemicals such as oxytocin which help the brain to grow. Research has highlighted how relationships can protect the child from the damaging effect of toxic hormones and neurochemicals.

Porges (2011) suggests that prosody, facial expressions, body language and eye gaze can convey calmness and safety to the child which allows the child to physiologically and psychologically calm down. However, children who have not received attuned interactions with their attachment figure and have developed an insecure or disorganised attachment have higher levels of stress hormones which can alter the development of the brain.

Children who are emotion coached are better able to establish good vagal tone, calm and regulate functions within their brain and body, and develop a more effective stress response system (Gottman et al., 1996).

# EMOTION COACHING IN PRACTICE

## THE THREE STEPS

### 1 Adult recognises, empathises with and validated the feelings of the child.

- All emotions are normal and not voluntary
- Behaviour is communication
- Empathise
- Be patient
- Provide narrative and label the emotion

#### Example Script:

*"I can see that you are angry because there are no lego bricks left to play with. I would get angry if that happened to me too. It is okay that you are feeling angry."*

### 2

### Adult empathetically sets limits on behaviour.

- State boundaries of acceptable behaviour
- Be clear
- Show no emotion
- Retain child's self-dignity

#### Example Script:

*"I know you are upset but running away and hiding in the bushes on the playground is not acceptable, you have to keep yourself safe."*

### 3

### Adult problem-solves with the child.

Explore feelings  
Scaffold solutions  
Empower the child through choice  
Reflect

#### Example Script:

*"I know you are upset but running away and hiding in the bushes on the playground is not acceptable, you have to keep yourself safe."*

## STRATEGIES

### Active Listening

Active listening communicates to the child that we are listening to them, understanding their feeling, caring about their feelings and giving empathy. Tips for active listening:

- Give the child time, if you are unavailable pass to someone else but always make sure the child is listened to
- Encourage talking  
*"Tell me how you are feeling,"*  
*"Tell me what has made you feel like this"*
- Summarise and reflect back  
*"It sounds like ....."*
- Using the child's language  
*"How do you feel when mummy feels mad?..."*

### Recognising and Naming Emotions

It is important that we educate children to be able to recognise and name how they are feelings. This can be done through many ways including:

Games such as matching the expression to the feeling  
Role play with dolls by creating a situation and asking the child how each doll is feeling.

Visuals to support the child communicating their feeling such as the 5-point scale or zones of regulation  
Commentating on observations that you and the child are seeing – *"Look, Tommy is stamping his feet and shouting, he is feeling angry"*.

Modelling – label how you are feeling in front of the child.

### Classroom Cards

Allow the child physical cards that he can use when he feels that his emotions are taking control. For example, this can be an "I need a break card" where they can leave the classroom for 5 minutes to calm down. You could also use an "I need to talk to you" card so that the child feels that they can always talk to you and you are always available when they need you.

### Therapeutic Stories

Write a story about a character such as an animal or vegetable that related to the child indirectly.

- A character faces a problem
- Character reacts inappropriately
- New character comes along to help them to problem-solve
- Character problem-solves
- Happy ending