

Emotion Coaching: 5 Steps to More Peaceful Parenting

Step 1: Emotional Awareness

Getting in tune with your child's emotions.

It's not difficult to figure out how a child is feeling when she breaks into tears after her sister breaks her favorite toy. She's angry and sad.

Likewise, it's a pretty safe bet that a child who is wearing a big smile and humming along to his favorite song in the back seat of the car is feeling happy and content.

Such insights come naturally to most parents. But sometimes a child's emotions are less obvious, and like all of us, children can experience several emotions at the same time. To discover what a child is feeling at such times takes a little more 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. It also means increasing our awareness of our own emotions along with those of a child, including those feelings that are harder to identify (like disappointment, hurt feelings, or worry). Whether these emotions are easy to spot or not, they shouldn't be taken for granted. Becoming aware of a child's emotions—especially before they escalate out of control—can benefit everyone.

It may sound simple, but being aware of what your child is feeling—and why she is feeling it—can open up ways that will allow you to play a meaningful role in helping your child grow up happy, healthy and well-adjusted.

The heart and mind connection.

More and more, scientists are learning how children's emotional development can affect both their physical and mental health. Studies show that children who are 'emotionally intelligent' are more likely to be self-confident, do better in school, have fewer behavioral problems, have better overall health, get along better with friends and others, and weather their parents' marital conflict better. Strong emotional health, in turn, makes them better prepared to deal with difficult events later in life.

So how does your ability to recognize and understand your child's emotions help? Awareness of these emotions creates the chance for you to connect with a child on an emotional level, to share all the ups and downs of life, and to guide and nurture him on the road to healthy emotional development.

On the trail of emotions.

It isn't always so easy to figure out why your young one is feeling sad, puzzled, giddy, joyful, surprised, embarrassed, fearful or proud. Sometimes it can take a good bit of detective work to unravel what a child has on her mind.

And that can take some digging.

It might not be apparent, but a boy who becomes sullen and angry with a younger sister may be feeling insecure with his place in the family and jealous of the attention she is getting. The reason a girl suddenly wants to stop going to her childcare center might have nothing to do with childcare at all. Instead she may be feeling rejected by a playmate at the center who found a new friend.

The hints to children's feelings aren't always written on their faces. Helping children develop the language to talk about emotions is an important part of the process. For example, they need to learn the words for emotions like disappointment, hurt feelings, sadness, and worry. But even before kids learn to express themselves, tuned-in adults can often decode children's messages by listening closely and trying to view the world from their point of view.

Looking for clues in make-believe.

It's not uncommon for young ones—especially those under seven—to express their own fears and uncertainties while playing. A young girl who is happily cuddling her doll, Molly, might suddenly 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, just as they do the adult's. 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, but keep an ear open for the real-life issues behind the nightmare.

To know your child, know yourself.

Although being aware of your child's negative emotions is important, don't forget to enjoy the positive moments as well. Sharing a child's joy and laughter is one of the best moments of parenthood.

Being aware of a child's emotions does take a lot of work. Recognizing and understanding emotions is a skill we can all develop, but putting it into practice in our daily lives can be more difficult for some people.

So how do you improve this skill? If you want to really understand what is going on with your child, Gottman suggests that you start by understanding your own emotional makeup. 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' like frustration, worry, joy, and tension do you use in a day? How do you handle feeling different emotions at the same time?

Gottman's research found that parents who were in touch with their own emotions were better able to relate to their children's feelings. Like any good guide, parents need to know the landscape if they want to lead their children through it.

The importance of awareness.

Awareness of a child's emotions is the foundation for a healthy relationship. Parents and caregivers who are tuned into a child's feelings are in a much better position to offer support and understanding during the tough times of anger, sadness and frustration, and they are in a better position to celebrate together the wonderful moments of joy, happiness and laughter. The sense of empathy parents and caregivers develop will be instrumental as they guide their child's overall emotional development.

Helpful Parenting Tips

- Try seeing the world from your child's view when he is struggling with an emotion.
- Listen to your child during playtime for clues to what is making her anxious, scared, happy or proud.
- Build awareness of your own emotions—the better you understand your own feelings, the better you will understand your child's feelings.
- When appropriate, share your emotions with your child.
- Help your child build a vocabulary for expressing his different feelings—and help him discover where these feelings come from.
- Understand that children can experience different emotions at the same time.
- Remember that children are learning about emotions by watching you handle yours.

Step 2: Recognizing Emotions

Building connections through giggles and tears.

As parents and caregivers, we experience the full range of our children's emotions nearly every day, and sometimes in ways that can stir up feelings in us, too. Who doesn't share a child's pride and happiness as he shows mom or dad a new drawing? On the other hand, it's hard not to get annoyed with a child who won't stop howling in the grocery store because you passed right by his favorite cookies.

These emotional moments are the times kids naturally turn to adults and caregivers. The response they receive can have a dramatic effect on the way they learn to deal with feelings.

Whether happy or sad, children's emotions offer parents two very important things: an opportunity to build a deeper and more trusting relationship and a time to teach them how to deal with the wonderful world of human feelings.

A chance to teach.

Seeing emotional outbursts as an opportunity for bonding and teaching, rather than just another problem that needs solving, is a change in attitude that lies at the heart of building a child's 'emotional intelligence.'

Researcher John Gottman has found that children whose parents respond to their emotions with empathy and patience:

- are more self-confident
- do better in school
- have fewer behavioral problems
- get along better with friends and others
- have fewer infectious illnesses
- can weather marital conflict better

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. Emotionally intelligent children are better able to adapt to the different social situations they experience as they get older.

Attitude is important.

Viewing emotional moments as opportunities, rather than burdens, is not an attitude that comes naturally to everyone. 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 negative emotions like sadness or anger as dangerous or harmful,

and try to help their children get rid of them as quickly as possible by replacing them with more positive, happy feelings.

For others, displays of emotions just make them uncomfortable. They may try to avoid or ignore their children's feelings, resorting to bribery or threats to control their children's emotional behavior.

Both of those approaches can actually do more harm than good, according to Gottman. Emotions—even negative ones—are not something to be dismissed or ignored; they are a normal part of being a happy, healthy, and fully-functioning person.

Learning how emotions work.

For young children, emotions are new and sometimes overwhelming. Kids don't have the benefit of an adult's life experience to understand that the pain they feel when a pet dies will get better with time. Parents and caregivers who support and comfort their child during hard times become that much closer with their child. By offering guidance and experience, they teach the child to deal with feelings that will emerge time and time again in their lives.

Opportunities to teach a child aren't just limited to heavy emotional moments. As all adults know, feelings can escalate. What starts out as mild anxiety about getting the first haircut can grow into a screaming fit once a child is in the barber's chair. By noticing and talking about feelings before they grow into a crisis, parents and caregivers not only defuse issues when they are small, they teach children an important problem-solving strategy.

Whether it's an intense emotional outburst or a quiet, less obvious emotional experience, how a parent acts in the emotional moment is critical. It's important to show patience, interest, and a willingness to join the child in the feeling before working together to find solutions. Parents who take the time to listen, understand, and teach during emotional moments do themselves and their children a lot of good. Not only are their children more likely to see mom and dad as important friends and allies during tough times, they are learning how to deal with emotions in a healthy, effective way.

Helpful Parenting Tips

- Be aware of your children's emotions throughout the day, so that you can recognize when they are upset, sad, or happy.
- Don't dismiss or avoid your children's emotions, but acknowledge and explore them in a patient, caring way.
- Share the feelings with your children, and encourage them to talk about their emotions.
- Provide some "emotional first aid" by letting your children know that:
 - They are acceptable to you—no matter what feelings appear
 - They are not alone—you are there to share the feelings
 - You understand their feelings

- Their feelings make sense
- It's OK to trust their emotional instincts
- Help them think of solutions to the situation—and let them suggest their own ideas.

Step 3: Listening Empathetically

Listening with your heart and your head.

Imagine this situation: you've brought your little one to his first neighborhood birthday party, and while all the other kids are running around in the backyard laughing and shouting, he is standing by a table full of presents in tears.

You know what's wrong—he is envious that those beautifully wrapped presents aren't for him. But no matter how many times you tell him not to be upset and to go out and have fun with the others, he won't stop crying.

He's a smart boy, you think, so why won't he listen to reason?

Explanations and logic might work for adults, but children look to parents and caregivers for something else when they feel swept away by an emotion—comfort and understanding. Children are looking for empathy.

This is when a parent's ears and heart really come in handy.

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.

Not only will listening with empathy help comfort the child, but research suggests (**Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1997**) it will also help improve her ability to soothe herself during times of trouble, which could have powerful and long-lasting benefits.

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 be feeling*—in this case, happy—you simply ask him how he is really feeling. Then listen carefully. If he can't tell you, you can help him identify these feelings: "I bet you wish you were getting some presents. That's called feeling jealous. You are feeling jealous and that makes you feel bad. A lot of people feel jealous sometimes."

This can be a very reassuring time for a child. After all, he didn't try to be envious about the presents, he just is. Knowing that an adult listens and understands what he is feeling can be just the kind of comfort he needs.

Not only that, but now you have given your child 2 words to describe the emotion, 'jealousy,' or 'envy,' which itself can have a calming effect!

Emotions matter.

A child's ability to delight in the happy times, and recover quickly from the bad ones, is a key part of good emotional health, according to Dr. John Gottman.

In his research on the emotional environment of families, Gottman found that children who have emotion-coaching parents:

- are more self-confident
- do better in school
- have fewer behavioral problems
- get along better with friends and others
- have fewer infectious illnesses
- can weather parents' conflict better

Strong emotional health, in turn, makes them better prepared to deal with difficult events later in life.

Obviously, not every emotional moment with your child is as easy to understand as an envious tantrum. Children's emotions are varied and complex. Often it is the low-level emotions, such as when a child just feels blue, that offer the biggest challenge to parents.

Listening and watching.

Getting at what is in your child's heart starts with listening to him carefully. By listening to your child's words, you show that his feelings matter. But listening might mean using more than just your ears. 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), body language (hands in fists, or a body posture that seems down), the words they speak and the way they say them (tone of voice, certain words emphasized), or other ways children reveal their attitudes about things.

Children can be reluctant to talk about their emotions, and it can take a patient and insightful adult to get to the root of the matter. If a child who loved swimming suddenly hates going to the pool, something is up. But ask her why and she is likely to just shrug her shoulders and say "nothing".

That's when adults need to press on, drawing on their own knowledge of their child's life. "Something is bothering you, you used to love the pool. Did something happen with your friends?"

The difficult part for most comes when the child starts opening up. It's hard sometimes not to view your child's problems as small or even silly.

If you find out that she had a fight with her friends at the pool, you might be tempted to tell her to just "forget about it."

That's not as easy as it sounds for a child. The one thing adults need to keep in mind is that children don't have the years of experience dealing with emotions that they do. To them, emotions are often new and strange. Situations that seem minor to a grownup can appear monumental to a child experiencing them for the first time.

Becoming a friend and ally.

Here's where parents can really become coaches, according to Gottman. The most effective way to help the child understand what she is feeling is to help put her feelings into words with simple statements, such as "it hurts when your friends don't want to play with you."

Reflecting the child's feelings back is not only comforting, it can make a child feel that they have a friend and an ally. It also puts the parent in a better position to help their child find a solution to the problems she is facing.

And that's 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 opportunities to teach. 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.

Helpful Parenting Tips

- Don't dismiss a child's emotions as silly or inconsequential—they are obviously very important to the child.
- Listen to your child in a way that lets her know you are paying attention and taking her seriously.
- Don't judge or criticize emotions, but find a way to show the child that you understand what he is feeling.
- Remember that words of understanding should always come before words of advice.

Step 4: Labeling Emotions

Tell me how you feel.

Anger...envy...sadness...frustration. These are feelings that come naturally to children. But how do you help them learn to cope with such emotions in a way that promotes both mental and physical health? The answer can be as simple as giving feelings a name.

Children often lack the basic vocabulary necessary to make sense of the emotions they feel, whether it is jealousy, hurt, fear or worry. Caregivers who tell a child with tears streaming down her cheek, "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. Those who help teach their children to name their emotions give them a valuable, lifelong skill.

Putting a name to the emotion not only helps children make sense of what they are feeling. Research studies suggest that it also helps calm their nervous systems and helps them recover faster from upsetting situations.

A key to emotional health.

Labeling emotions is an important step in Emotion Coaching. Research indicates (**Gottman, & DeClaire, 1997**) that children raised with an "Emotion Coaching" style that encourages healthy emotional development:

- are more self-confident
- do better in school
- have fewer behavioral problems
- get along better with friends and others
- have fewer infectious illnesses
- can weather their parents' conflict better

Strong emotional health, in turn, may make them better prepared to deal with difficult events later in life. One of the fundamental parts of healthy emotional development for children is to learn how to self-soothe during times of distress. This doesn't mean the children feel less angry, scared or frustrated. It's healthy to experience these powerful feelings. These children are just better able to process their feelings, bounce back from emotional events, and refocus on other activities. And when children can bounce back from emotional experiences, they are more able to pay attention to important tasks like maintaining friendships or completing schoolwork.

Soothing the child.

So how does something as simple as naming emotions help? Science provides us with emerging answers and intriguing questions.

Studies from various laboratories 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. Exactly why this happens remains unclear, but some scientists believe it has to do with the brain's structure and how emotions are processed. In the brain, there are certain areas primarily responsible for processing emotions, and other areas primarily responsible for handling logical thinking and language. What's important here are the connections between these areas, and neuroscientists are studying these connections very closely.

Verbalizing an emotion engages the language area in the left side of the brain, which is also an area involved in logic and other higher-level types of thinking. Dr. Gottman believes that 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 to think about the emotion in a different way, leading to a calming effect.

Helpful Parenting Tips

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 these feelings. That can be tricky. Like adults, children can experience mixed emotions. A child with a new baby sister on the way may feel both excited for the new arrival and anxious about the way life at home will change. Exploring the full range of emotions will reassure a child that it is normal to experience conflicting feelings.

Parents and caregivers can help children develop a rich and accurate vocabulary for their emotions. To do this, parents and caregivers can:

- Start identifying emotions together early—you can begin even before the child can talk. One way is to use a game that Dr. Gottman calls 'The Guys,' where a parent draws a different face on each finger—one finger might have an angry face, while others could have sadness, happiness, surprise, or fear. These 'guys' then talk about their day, and why they feel a certain way. After hearing from each 'guy,' you can ask your child to grab the finger that is the most like they way they feel (this can start as early as 9 months or so).
- Use puppets to show different emotions and then talk about what these emotions are called, and when people feel them.
- Refrain from 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.

Other benefits.

There is another powerful reason to help children find the right words for their emotional experiences—it's a way of showing empathy. For some caregivers, a child's emotional

outburst can be a time of intense frustration and annoyance. But for others, it provides a perfect opportunity to both teach and 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, and that is something all of us find comforting.

Step 5: Setting Limits

Solving problems together.

Kids act out their emotions in a lot of different ways. They giggle when they are happy. They smile when they are proud. And they mope when they are blue.

Sometimes, though, they do things that cross the line. One may hit his brother because he is angry, bite a friend because she is jealous, or break toys because they are frustrated.

For children, especially young ones, learning acceptable ways of expressing emotions are some of the most important lessons in life. The challenge for parents is to accept and value their children's emotions as they set limits on inappropriate behavior. The next step is to help children learn to successfully puzzle their way through problems, both big and small, which are a normal part of growing up.

Setting limits is the first step in an entire problem solving strategy, according to Dr. John Gottman. Once you have made it clear what's OK and what's not OK—and *why*—you should help your children identify, evaluate, and choose effective solutions to their problems. As you set boundaries and teach children positive ways of behaving, you are teaching your children the values of your family and culture.

Feelings vs. behavior.

Children's behavior will sometimes cross the line. What happens next can have a big effect on their emotional development.

Gottman suggests that adults need to make a clear distinction at such times: the child's *feelings* aren't the problem, their *misbehavior* is. After all, kids can't control how they feel about something. Neither can adults, for that matter. But we can learn to control how we act on those feelings, and that is what we should teach our children to understand. We need to communicate to them 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 hitting his brother is not OK.

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

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

For example, a father might say “Your sister took your crayons without asking and that made you mad. I would be angry too. But it is not okay for you to rip up her coloring book. Now, can you think of a different thing to do?”

How does this help? Setting limits and problem solving in this way supports your children's overall emotional development in several ways. First, your child's feelings are valued as you show that they matter to you. You also can provide (and model) empathy by showing that you've had those feelings too. Through setting limits and teaching problem solving strategies, you are giving them the skills and strategies they need to cope successfully with the big and wonderful world of human feelings.

Lifelong benefits.

The rewards to this approach can last a lifetime. Gottman's research (**Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1997**) has found that children who are raised with an “emotion coaching” parenting style:

- do better in school
- are more self-confident
- have fewer behavioral problems
- get along better with friends and others
- have fewer infectious illnesses
- can weather their parents' conflict better

Strong emotional health, in turn, makes them better prepared to deal with difficult events later in life.

Setting limits and finding solutions.

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. Children need to learn that these limits are firm even when emotions run high. When children feel a strong emotion (like fear), and their behavior is just fine, setting limits isn't needed. But letting children know you understand their feelings, and then finding a way to work through the emotion together, are the next important steps. Helping kids learn the best way to solve problems can take some practice.

What it boils down to is:

- setting goals—what do you want to do?
- thinking about ideas to reach these goals—how many ideas can you think of that might help solve the problem?
- helping the child pick an acceptable solution—what idea sounds like it will work best?

Setting goals really means asking your children what they would like to accomplish—and giving them plenty of time to think about it. In the example above, it may be as simple as keeping a sister away from the crayons. Other problems might be more difficult. If a pet dies or a friend moves away, the goal may be to help ease the pain of loss.

Creative thinking helps.

The real creativity comes in thinking through possible solutions to the problems. This can be somewhat challenging with young children, because they often have a hard time keeping more than one option in mind. Pretending different scenarios can be helpful, perhaps using puppets to show different ways of approaching the problem. The first puppet might ask nicely to use the crayons, or two puppets could talk about how they can share the crayons in the future or agree to take turns.

It's important to give children plenty of time to come up with solutions. 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. And try not to be critical of these ideas—even if they are not quite as good as the idea you had in mind.

After thinking of some possible things to do, the parent or caregiver can help the child pick an acceptable solution to the problem at hand. The child might not always pick the best one, but that's not necessarily a bad thing. Children often learn best from their own mistakes, and it can sometimes be more effective to let a child try a reasonable solution that fails first before finding one that works.

Helping a child learn how to cope successfully with a problem is one of the most rewarding moments for a parent or caregiver. Giving children the skills to deal with the world around them is what parents and caregivers are supposed to do. Kids should be given the freedom to experience all emotions to their fullest, but they also need to understand the difference between appropriate and inappropriate behavior. With this combination of valuing emotions while setting limits on behavior, parents can help children learn to find solutions to the challenges they will face as they grow into adults.

Helpful Parenting Tips

- Discipline misbehaving children for what they do, not for how they feel
- When children misbehave, use it as a time to teach by helping them understand their emotion, give that feeling a name, and explain why their behavior was inappropriate and unacceptable
- When confronting a problem with your children, start by thinking about what they want to accomplish, creating several ideas for doing this, and following their lead in picking a solution